OreShura Volume 5

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 5.

著者

裕時悠示（ゆうじ ゆうじ）

玄ちゃんとおもち屋を開きたい。

イラスト

るろお

いやはやもーなんつーか。
俺と担当と裕時さんが（進行的に）修羅場すぎる!!

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俺の彼女と幼なじみが修羅場すぎる5

裕時悠示

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俺の彼女と幼なじみが修羅場すぎる5

「えーくん、愛してる」
「いいこと、鋭太。私はあなたの彼女なのよ」
「わたしもギュッとして？」
「ねえねえタッくん！　あの女とはいつ別れてくれるの？」
右に幼なじみ。左に彼女。前に元カノ。後ろに婚約者。この世には神も仏もいないのだろうか？
千和からの思わぬ告白で、終わりを迎えた夏合宿。修羅場の鼓動が聞こえる中、二学期に向けて牙を研ぐ少女たちの物語。千和と母校の中学校へ！　愛衣を巡って風紀委員と対決！　ヒメとお泊まり!?　真涼と恋愛脳狩り!?　等を収録。
裕時悠示×るろおが贈る、甘修羅らぶ×らぶコメディ第5弾！

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俺の彼女と幼なじみが修羅場すぎる

「ねえねえタッくん！
式は神社で挙げない？」

『――なにしてるの？』

『鋭太くんは私の彼氏なのよ』

『そんなの関係ないもん！』

Danger!

Kanojyo

Osananajimi

=Shuraba

Motokano

Konyakusha

夏川真涼
Masuzu Natsukawa

春咲千和
Chiwa Harusaki

俺の彼女と幼なじみが修羅場すぎる5

裕時悠示

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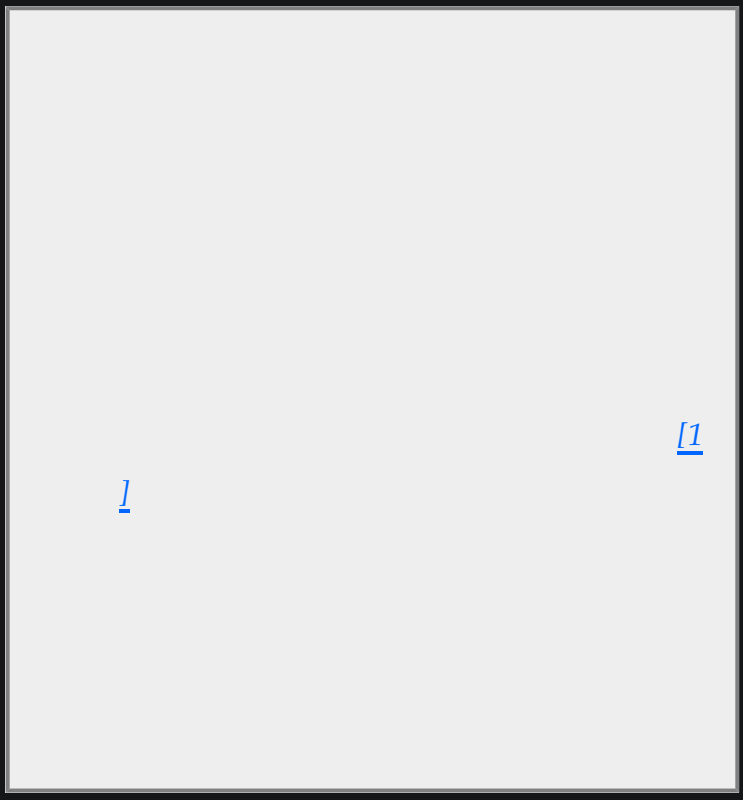
【修羅場】しゅら-ば
1、血みどろの激しい戦いや争いの行われる場所。しゅらじょう。「―をくぐりぬける」
2、人形浄瑠璃・歌舞伎・講談などで、激しい戦いや争いの演じられる場面。
（デジタル大辞泉より）



#0: Prelude

#0 プロローグ

I remember something that probably took place during elementary school.

When I had cut out a healthy piece of fried pork chops for lunch and shared it with my childhood friend, Harusaki Chiwa, her response reverberated through the entire classroom...

'Ei-kun, I love you~♪'

Not only did the entire class laugh at me, but my homeroom teacher also even teased us and said, 'she's going to be Kidou-kun's wife in the future!'. It was honestly way too embarrassing. I only gave that portion to Chiwa because I had already been full and couldn't eat anymore.

On the way home from school, I had let a rain-drenched Chiwa duck under my umbrella and heard her say:

'Ei-kun is so sweet! I love you!'

No, in this kind of situation, anyone would do that kind of thing, right?

We were going home together and I had an umbrella while Chiwa was drenched. Where did that insult come from? What kind of weird play was this?

In short, Chiwa's 'I love you' was her way of expressing 'thank you'.

As expected, after we had moved onto middle school, she very rarely said that in front of others. But when we were alone, Chiwa would continue to say 'I love you' like always. I had also been completely used to it, so I would always reply disinterestedly with 'oh' or 'yeah'.

After all, we grew up as childhood friend and she was like a younger sister to me.

Basically like family.

Even if there was love, it wasn't a 'romantic' kind. It was a 'familial' love.

That's, what I always thought.

Until now, when Chiwa kissed me.

"[...]"

I opened my mouth to ask why, but nothing came out.

Every time I moved my lips, I could clearly feel the aftertaste of the kiss.

The building that we used for summer training camp wasn't very far off from the sea, so as we stood there silently and alone in the living room, the sound of the rising and falling waves could be heard in the distance.

All of my senses were concentrated in front of me—

This wasn't a dream.

"—Because I have always been next to you, you didn't notice it, right?"

Chiwa's voice was a little hoarse.

Even as tears dripped down, she still wore a smile and looked up at me.

"You didn't notice, right? I even said it so many times. Hey, this time, will you listen carefully?"

Chiwa did not wipe away the tears on her cheeks and instead continued:

"Ei-kun, I love you."

At the same time, the sound of the door opening seemed to overlap.

By reflex, I looked back— only to discover the person standing there was my 'girlfriend'.

"If 'I love you' could solve everything, there wouldn't be a need for the police, right?"

Natsukawa Masuzu also smiled.

"This seems like quite a happy moment. Miss Childhood Friend, may I join in?"

But her voice was extremely cold.

Masuzu lifted her ice-like hair without letting her gaze off of Chiwa.

Across from her, Chiwa also smiled slightly.

Even though her tone was as if she was making a joke, she stared straight at Masuzu and spoke resolutely.

"Can't you see the atmosphere? Girlfriend, why don't you come back in nine years?"

Even if she didn't say it, nine years was the amount of time Chiwa and I had spent together.

This was undoubtedly a provocation.

Her implication was—

You and him don't have the same relationship that we have.

This was simultaneously her declaration of war.

"Waiting nine years, it would be impossible for me."

Masuzu maintained her smile and unhesitatingly asserted.

"If the meaning of all of that is to continuously accumulate a meaningless day to day life, yet be unable to step across boundaries together, I certainly wouldn't want to become that kind of person".

The violent blow made the smile disappear from Chiwa's face.

On the contrary, the smile on Masuzu's face deepened.

"If that nine years thing is what you are so proud of——————— don't you think that that's lamentable? It's like saying, 'I just want to live a long life' with pride.

In an ordinary situation, Chiwa would probably have started crying now.

If it was an argument, there was no way Chiwa could keep up with Masuzu. Take me as an example. When I confronted that venomous girl, I was tortured to death. There was no way Chiwa could match her.

But today, Chiwa wasn't the usual.

"...Yeah, it might be as Natsukawa says."

She conceded it very openly.

That straightforwardness made Masuzu and me dumbstruck.

"I realized it now, up until this moment I have been too naive. Solely to rely on the amount of time I've spent together with Ei-kun in the past. That's why I can't forgive Natsukawa, because that position of Ei-kun's girlfriend, that place where… that where I've always wanted to be, but I just couldn't get there————— Yet, it came so naturally to Natsukawa. 'That's too unfair', I used to think that, because even though I've always liked Ei-kun, and for so long at that, how did she manage to become Ei-kun's girlfriend after knowing him only since high school, for just two months?"

Chiwa clenched her fingers into fists, and her voice became forceful.

"But after I saw what happened on the stage yesterday, I understood. It's because I think like that, that I can't win against Natsukawa Masuzu."

This was probably the first time I've ever heard Chiwa speak so seriously.

"I haven't been honest. Even though I always wanted to be Ei-kun's girlfriend, someplace in my heart I felt that 'keeping things like this isn't bad after all'. But that's wrong, because it won't last forever. I should have realized it earlier, but I simply didn't get it. The only reason I've noticed it now is thanks to Natsukawa, so——thank you."

"Thank you?"

Natsukawa opened her eyes and her voice became distorted.

"Are… You saying that for real?"

"Sincerely and seriously, I really want to thank you… Though from Natsukawa's perspective, it probably looks like I'm shooting myself in the foot."

Chiwa smiled slightly.

—What kind of situations is this?

Before I even noticed, the exchange of blows already happened.

"Eita-kun is *my* boyfriend, you now? So you shouldn't interfere with that..."

Masuzu's voice shuddered slightly.

"That isn't important!"

Chiwa's retorted with a threatening tone.

"I won't be jealous anymore, I won't hold back anymore! I like Ei-kun! I love him! I love him greatly! Love of the love! I don't want to repress my feelings anymore! I'm not going to lie about it anymore!"

"There's no common sense in this."

The venomous Masuzu, ordinarily capable of pulling preposterous arguments out of subspace, had yet to appear.

Normally, someone else would say that Masuzu was the one who had 'no common sense'.

"That's why I said that he already has a girlfriend. A partner. Not throwing the glove to someone who has someone, is one of the rules of love, right? Hey, Eita-kun is *mine*. That's already set in stone. Why won't you give up?"

"Obviously because I love Ei-kun!"

"That's simply not a reason! Why don't you understand?!"

"Then why don't *you* understand?"

Chiwa's words were filled with passion.

"Because I love him, it can't be helped! This has nothing to do with girlfriends or childhood friends! This feeling can't possibly be stopped! This is what people call true love, Natsukawa surely understands this!"

Natsukawa's body trembled substantially.

Her legs were completely unsteady and her silver hair fluttered helplessly.

"'True Love', is it?"

Her voice was hoarse and furthermore quiet. Because I was standing right next to her, I was the only one who could hear it.

"What's so great about that 'true' thing? Just what's so beautiful about it? Someone like me who has to cling to the fake one like if my life depended on it, then what happens to those like me?"

"Natsukawa…?"

Chiwa was about to draw closer, but Masuzu immediately lifted her head with a severe look.

"Even if you say stuff like that, I absolutely *won't* give him up. Since you can't have him, you might as well go look for someone else——— because Kidou Eita is the only one for me."

An angry fire ignited in Chiwa's eyes.

She glared at Masuzu who was an entire head taller than her.

"This kind of thing isn't something you can decide! Because for me, too, Ei-kun is the only one!"

…Oi.

Did it really devolve to this unmanageable mess?

The two of them had already closed in within range of each other's hands.

If I don't quickly come up with something to control the scene, there's probably going to be a dispute between those two. No, it is entirely possible that it ends up in a physical fight.

...But, how should I stop them?

Whenever there was a scene of mayhem like this in TV dramas or manga, I always retorted, 'Why don't you just pick a side'!

But in my situation, I had already declared myself to be 'Masuzu's boyfriend'.

And since Chiwa insisted she 'wasn't giving up', this approach was useless.

I really needed to come up with a plan, though.

It was fine if I couldn't reconcile them. I just needed to get them to stop them from fighting temporarily.

I didn't want to see my girlfriend and childhood friend fight. The mayhem or whatever should just stay in the fictional world!

"Hold it, you two!"

I spoke from the depths of my lungs, and took a step forward.

"Don't leave me aside and act on your own! This isn't something that you two can solve by simply fighting between the two of you!"

But Masuzu and Chiwa continued to stare at each othere.

"You just stay quiet. Your blabbing will make the situation even worse."

"That's right, because this is a problem between me and Natsukawa."

Thus, they didn't even glance at me.

So it’s like this ——Then I can’t back down.

I vigorously stamped on the ground with a 'bang!' and said:

"Enough already! You two just look at me now!"

Maybe because I managed to express my anger, this time the two of them looked back at me.

"Don't just completely ignore me, while you two keep arguing without restrain! That's what I find most vexing in the whole world. You should have heard of it, didn't you, Chiwa?"

Chiwa momentarily gave a confused 'huh?', but she quickly sensed what I was trying to say.

"Sorry, I didn't consider Ei-kun's feelings."

The argument suddenly lost its momentum and Masuzu looked as if she had been taken off-guard.

"I haven't told this to Masuzu yet, right? About my parents."

"Yeah… All I know is that your parents aren't present."

"To say it straight, there aren't any. After their break up, each of them found themselves a new parter and parted towards a new life, leaving their third-grade kid casted aside."

I've only told this to Chiwa and Kaoru before. Masuzu was the third person.

Even though I never wanted to bring this issue about my parents to light, this wasn't the time to worry about that.

"At that time, they had made me suffer a lot. My parents had kept blaming each other for adultery and

fought with each other, it had been carnage. Their child, me—had been completely ignored as they rained curses at each other. 'Get out of the house!', '*You* get out!', things like that… How should I put it? It had just been unbearable. I guess that was what people call a scene from Hell."

Masuzu awkwardly lowered her head.

"Of course, I'm not accusing you two of being like that, because it's partially my fault that it has become to this. I have no right to blame you guys. But——— what's the point of arguing like this? Is this what you call an outstanding maiden? Will it make you popucute? Cursing, blaming, and criticizing each other— These kinds of people don't posses any appeal at all!"

Chiwa and Masuzu sank completely into silence.

Even though I was flaunting my own misfortunes and guilty conscience, it seemed like I successfully persuaded them to stop.

...Ahh, great!

To be honest, I really had been terrified a few moments ago. I actually thought I'd be sandwich-stabbed to death, if I hadn't been careful.

"I'm sorry, I didn't consider your feelings."

Masuzu lowered her head and softly apologized to me .

"Don't fret about it, especially since you didn't know about this before."

"...But, I'm really happy."

"Huh?"

Masuzu raised her head and exposed a rather embarrassed smile:

"Because, now I know more about you."

Hu—!

Masuzu fell onto me and wrapped herself around my left arm.

"Why are you taking advantage of the confusion?!"

Of course Chiwa wasn't going to accept this quietly, so she grabbed my right arm.

"What's with you two?! Did you understand what I just said?"

"Yes, I surely won't neglect you anymore. I'll always keep you by my side, so——— Let's go to my room, okay ?"

"Haaa?!"

"I'm not going to neglect Ei-kun, either! We're totally going to continue living on good terms with each other!"

"Haaaaaa—?!"

What's with these girls? I don't get them at all!

While I hopelessly stood there, they strongly pulled my arms simultaneously.

I-It hurts! It hurts!

"Let go of that hand, That's-Too-Bad-Chihuahua!"

"*You* let go of that hand, you stupid girlfriend whose only redeeming feature is that pretty face!"

"No, both of you should let go!"

As if it was just a dream, my voice didn't reach the ears of those two girls that had completely forgotten about me .

"——What are you guys doing?"

I turned my head in the direction of the voice and found Akishino Himeka at the door with her head tilted incomprehensibly.

The presence of the great hero that was my ' ex-girlfriend' couldn't have come at a more reliable time!

"Hime, you came at the perfect time! Please rescue me! "

"...Assignment understood."

Hime wore a serious and taut expression, and trotted over.

Does she intend to use her body to just knock Chiwa and Masuzu away? —That's what I thought, but to my surprise, she lightly jumped up and held onto my torso.

"Only with these two is too crafty. Give me some hugs as well."

"THAT'S NO SAVIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!"

Normally, if someone hugged me from the front, my posture would unsteadily fall over. However, since Hime was so light and I being pulled on the left and right, by some miracle I remained on my feet. But I didn't want to remain stable like this!

At this moment, I heard the sound of someone's steps in the hallway.

"Hey, hey! Ta-kun! I just thought of something. Do you want to get married at the shrine? Ai-chan wants to have an epic victory in front of the shrine♪"

The person who barged in with her arms spinning in circles was Fuyuumi Ai. Like usual, she wasn't paying attention to the atmosphere. No, it's not enough to say that she couldn't read it... She was a person who had the atmosphere kinda as if she lived in another world.

When she noticed the devastation in the living room, she tilted her head blankly.

"That's strange… What are you guys doing?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all, A-chan! Why don't you do a U-turn and go outside for a run?!"

How did I manage to make the situation this complicated?!

However, Fuyuumi was apparently prompted by her instincts as a disciplinary committee member, and she extended her finger in that familiar, strict pose.

"Chiwa, and you there, Natsukawa-san too! Stop it already, do you fail to notice that he's bothered?!"

Yeeeeeees! It's been such a while since A-chan said such a sensible thing!

"Even Hime-chan, what are you doing?! If you're always like this, you'll never cultivate your womanly ability."

Hime lifted her head from my chest and waved at her own love master.

"Master, master."

"...What?"

"Eita's back is free."

"——?!"

Fuyuumi suddenly opened her eyes wide and stared.

"Errr, Fuyuumi?"

"Really, why is this club filled with girls that have no shame? The only decent one is me."

"Even though you say that, why are you positioning yourself at my back?!"

Also, this girl is way too fast! Those agile steps!

A soft weight leaned against my back, and a pair of slim, lily-white arms extended from her short sleeves and wrapped around my neck.

"Wahh♪ So broad! This is the best! So warm ~ warrm!"

Anyone…

"This amazing back will be mine in a couple years… Fufufu♪"

It doesn't matter who, anyone, please save meeeeee!

In the very end—

After the pulling competition between the four girls who surrounded me ended with no clear result, Hime and then Masuzu collapsed after exhausting all of their energy. Chiwa and Fuyuumi, who were left in the end, were evenly matched. However, I was completely drained and collapsed into the pile beside the first two.

By the time we were finally able to move, it was ten minutes before the train was supposed to leave. The five of us collected our luggage in a hurry, and charged to the train station.

During the return trip on the train that we barely managed to catch, Masuzu and Chiwa barely spoke a word.

Their gazes never left the window, and they silently kept their mouths closed, emitting an aura that made it difficult for anyone to talk to them.

"President and Chihuahua have a weird status effect. Paralysis? Or perhaps stone curse?"

"Hey, did something happen between the two of you? Did you get in a fight?"

Even if Hime and Fuyuumi asked, I didn't have the energy to explain. I guess all I could do was to vaguely cover up the truth.

These two girls that were arguing franticly not too long ago were now silent. It absolutely shocked me.

Because these two went through all that earlier, they were still maintaining a subtle equilibrium in their relationship. Perhaps this summer was going to be a turning point for them.

"...I can't say that this isn't my problem."

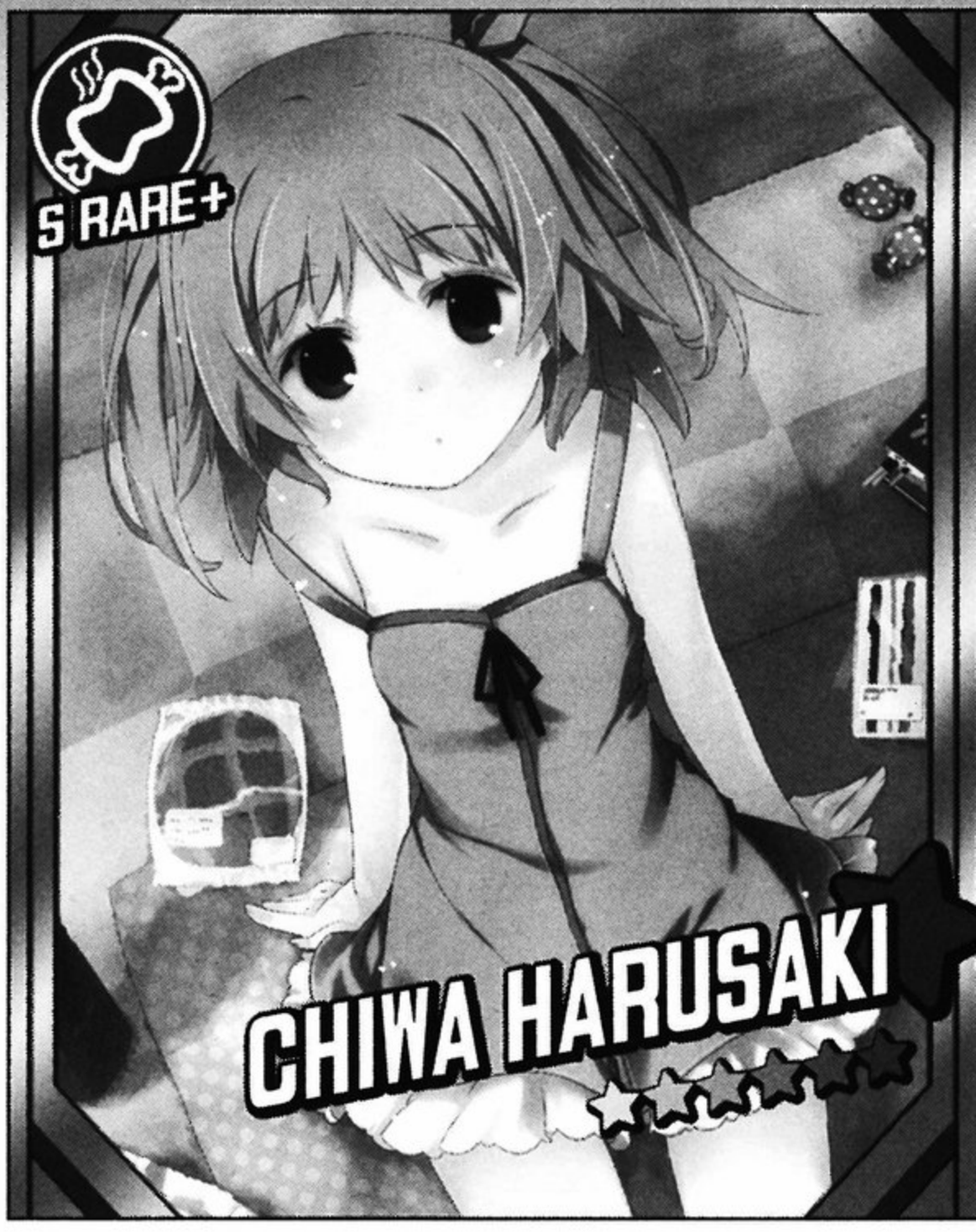
I whispered quietly to avoid anyone else hearing it.

It wasn't just Chiwa or Masuzu. I also had no choice but to change.

Would I accept my childhood friend who took the step forward? Or would I continue my fake relationship with my 'girlfriend'?

As expected, it was hard to choose.

【荒ぶるチワワ】春咲千和



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特技：おかわりダンス

♥プロフィール♥

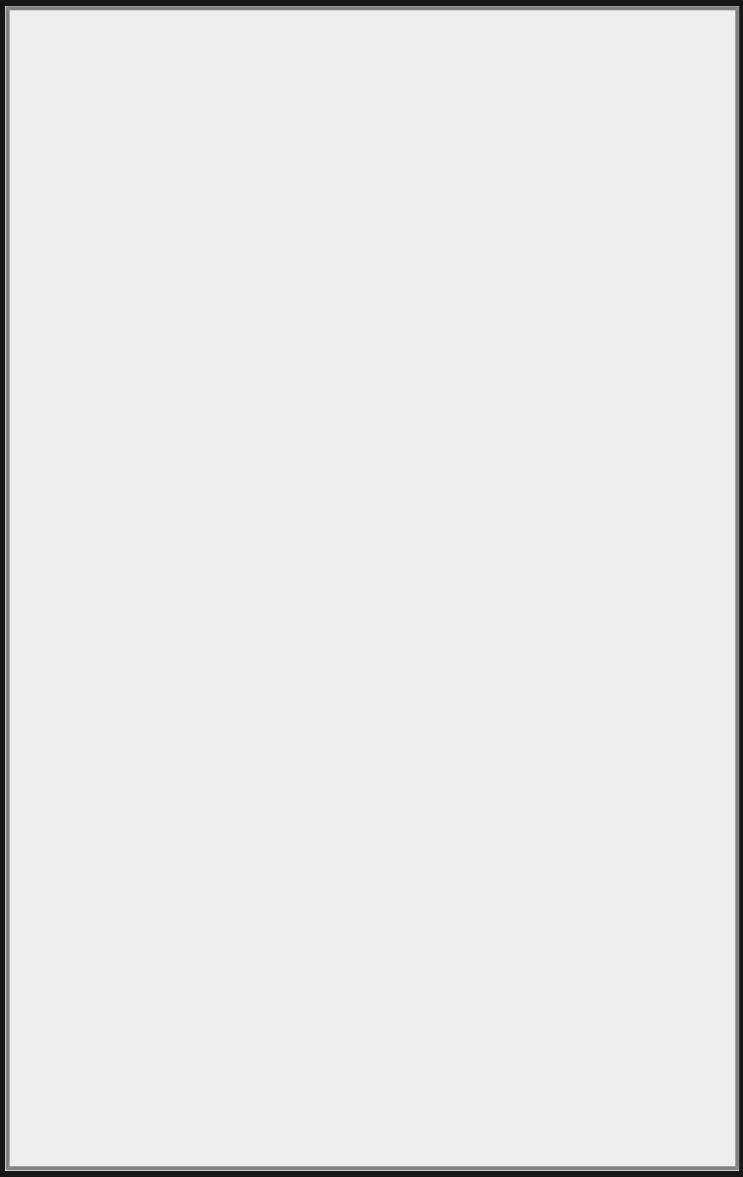
「千に和むと書いて千和ちゃんでーす！」

♥親愛度UP♥

「えーくん、愛してる！」

♥親愛度MAX♥

「えーくん。愛してる…」



#1: Chiwa, a Nine Year Portion of Love

#1 千和、九年分の「だいすき」

Although our summer club trip already ended, there were two weeks left of summer vacation.

The intersession break for cram school is also ending this week, so next week I'll have to start studying seriously again when the latter session of classes begin.

I told myself this, but my frame of mind actually wasn't relaxed at all.

After being confessed to by Chiwa and assaulted by mayhem, my head was still throbbing, and my thoughts were a mess. I felt light-headed just from walking, as if I wasn't standing on my own feet.

By the time I got home and closed the front door, I was practically about to fall over.

"I-I'm finally alone...!"

After taking a huge gulp of tap water from the kitchen, I wearily laid down on the sofa in the living room. Smelling my home after being away for three days made me feel nostalgic and relaxed. It made me want to take a nap.

By the time I realized it, it was already about four o'clock in the evening.

It was about time to make dinner. I needed to make two portions of rice, and two portions of vegetables, so the two of us could eat together. Like usual, I'd share dinner with my childhood friend.

...but with everything that's been going on, will Chiwa still come to eat?

Suddenly, the phone in my pocket started vibrating.

Trying to guess if it was Masuzu or Chiwa, I took a look at my phone—

"Kaaaaaaoruuuuuuuuuu————————! I love you the most!"

"Hyaa!?"

The warped sound of my best friend's voice came from the other side of the phone.

"Don't suddenly shout like that, Eita! You'll scare people."

"Your phone call came at the perfect timing! You really are my best friend! My one and only best friend!"

"...What's wrong? Are you at home right now? Did something happen during the club trip?"

My best friend is so awesome. He understands me so well!

I told him everything that happened during the clup trip.

Like during the OreDere Contest, Masuzu and I kissed on stage.

Afterwards, Chiwa confessed to me.

Then Hime and Fuyuumi got bundled in, and it turned into mayhem.

"Really? Chihuahua finally decided for herself then."

After hearing everything, Kaoru didn't seem particularly surprised.

It sounded like he was in the bathroom, with how his voice echoed. Kaoru had this habit of taking baths while

texting and making phone calls. As a high school boy, this was a rather strange habit.

"What do you mean by 'finally'?"

"'Finally' just means finally. I've known that Chihuahua's liked you for a while."

"Huh, really?"

"Mm, really. I think the only person who didn't know was you, Eita?"

"...is that so...?"

To be honest, I was thoroughly shocked. I used to always brag I understood Chiwa the most, but I never realized it was only in my head...

"Well for anyone, if they were to look closely..."

I didn't know if Kaoru's words were meant to comfort me or what?

"You considered Chihuahua to be your little sister, right?"

"Yeah, I basically took her as family. To be honest, for her to want me to become her sweetheart is rather..."

"About that point—"

The sounds of water splashing over could be heard.

"I think Chihuahua was aware of that herself. That's why she couldn't confess during middle school."

"Isn't it the same now?"

When I asked this, Kaoru replied very clearly,

"Well, Eita has a girlfriend now?"

"Yeah..."

I couldn't help but give a sigh.

"If Natsuzawa hadn't started going out with you, Eita , the situation wouldn't have turned out like this so suddenly."

Kaoru's words really drove the nail in.

If you went back to the very beginning, the root of all the mayhem started from there.

Furthermore, my relationship with Masuzu was only fake, so this honestly was just one thing following another. All the strings were tangled together, and it had reached an irreparable extent.

"Eita, it seems like you're in a tight spot."

Kaoru's voice from the bathroom suddenly became soft.

"Actually, I have a good plan. Do you want to hear?"

Huh? Really?

"Sure, what's your plan?"

"Go out with me."

"...huh?"

"Dump Natsukawa-san and Chihuahua, and come date me. Like that, both of them will give up, right!?"

Kaoru's energetic voice seemed to say,「*What do you think? It's a great idea, right?!*

But—

".....*sigh*~~~"

"W-What's that whole-hearted sigh supposed to mean?!"

Sigh.

It was probably true that if I faked having that kind of interest, the girls wouldn't be interested anymore, but—

"No way. Absolutely no way. Definitely no way."

"Hmph—I really thought it was a good plan~!"

I heard the splashing sounds of legs agitating the water through the phone.

"So why don't you just spin a pencil and decide—?"

"Hey, you've suddenly become really trivial!"

"Well becoming trivial is completely called for! Even if it's me, if you treat me like that, I'll be upset, you idiot!"

"...? S-Sorry."

To be honest, I had no clue what he was talking about, but I felt I should at least apologize.

A small sigh came from the phone.

"Alright. Just take it as a joke. If we're talking about my personal desires, I hope you'll pick Chihuahua, because I don't want to see her crying expression."

"Mh..."

So Kaoru's relationship with Chiwa was quite good. After all, we've all played together since middle school.

"Although I've never said it before, I've always secretly supported Eita and Chihuahua's relationship."

"Really?"

"Because you two make me feel jittery, and also because Chihuahua once sweetly asked me to help her. I think that if your girlfriend was Chihuahua it wouldn't be bad... ah, but since Ai-chan also showed up , nothing's definite."

"Sorry, thanks for all your trouble."

Really—Kaoru laughed and spoke,

"Eita's really made me suffer many things, so you should listen to my ideas occasionally, okay? Oh right, after second semester, my—kyaaa!"

A scream came from the other end of the telephone.

It sounded rather like a girl's voice.

...was that Kaoru's voice?

"Hey, Kaoru? Are you okay?"

"Honestly! Why'd you come in, Dad!? ...I said I didn't faint, and I was talking on the phone! That being said, cover up your front you pervert!"

I guess it was an argument between father and son.

Though, it was kind of weird to call your father a「pervert, right? Perhaps he only wanted to have some time with his son, so it seemed kind of pitiful.

It was was vulgar to be eavesdropping on the details of a fight between a father and son, so I quietly hung up the phone.

"I guess I can only come up with a plan myself..."

I laid flat on the sofa and gave a sigh.

Even so.

If you looked at the facts, being confessed to by a girl should normally make a person happy.

But, why is my mood so downcast?

Is it because I'm Anti-Love? Or is it because I hate mayhem?

—no, I actually felt it was something else.

But what was it? This sulky mood.

"...it was Chiwa."

I never expected that Chiwa, who was a sister to me, actually liked me.

Why would she... have those kinds of feelings...?

....

♦

"Ei-kun, wake up! Ei-kun—"

Just when I was about to guess who it was, Chiwa's face appeared in front of my eyes.

I guess I had unintentionally fallen asleep on the sofa. I glanced at the time, it already six o'clock in the evening.

I hurriedly wiped away my drool and sat up.

"S-Sorry. I haven't made dinner yet."

"No, you don't have to do that anymore."

Chiwa spoke while nodding and smiling.

"What don't I have to do? Are you not hungry?"

"I wasn't talking about that. I actually came to apologize about things that happened today."

Chiwa deeply bowed, being very serious about the matter.

"I'm sorry for making a scene in front of Ei-kun!"

"…O-oh."

"I never considered Ei-kun's conflicting feelings, so I must have made things difficult for you, right? I made a huge amount of trouble for you, so I'm really sorry! Ah—why I am I like this? It was the same during my confession. My heart was thumping like crazy, and I was worried that I wouldn't be able to express myself clearly. Just when I thought I'd finally be able to say it,

Natsukawa suddenly appeared with something that didn't make sense, and after that it turned into a mess! I don't even remember what I said! I'm sorry!"

After saying everything with one breath, Chiwa again lowered her head. Her entire face was red.

"Hey, don't apologize, Chiwa. I won't mind it."

I tried to comfort her.

"Think about it. Up until now, you've been practicing confessions during club activities, right? Compared to that time when your tongue slipped and said,「I'm going to confehsuyu!, you've already improved a lot.

When I finished speaking, Chiwa's face turned an even brighter red.

"I-I-I tried really hard to forget about that~!"

"Huh!?"

Damn. I thought that would help comfort her, but it turns out I stepped on a landmine.

"Ei-kun you idiot! Idiot! Go die!"

"S-sorry!"

This time, the person bowing their head was me. Damn. Why did I have such bad luck?

Just then, a soft thing touched my forehead.

There was a「chuu~ sound.

I recognized this sensation.

Just half a day ago, my lips had experienced it.

"Just kidding. Actually, I love you the most."

The area around Chiwa's eyes was slightly moist, and she smiled slightly.

"W-Wait! That wasn't what I meant to say!"

"In the past, I've never been able to say「love like that.[2] From now on, I'll say it a lot. To make up for nine years, hm? Are you prepared for this?"

"I said that wasn't what I meant!"

No good. If this continued, I'd be pulled down this route!

I took a deep breath, and spoke only after my boiling head cooled down a little.

"Hey, Chiwa. Let me say this clearly."

"Okay."

"I've only looked at you as my childhood friend, so even if you say you like me, I honestly can't understand you very well."

"Mh. I understand that very well."

Chiwa nodded her head, not caring even to the slightest degree. It was just like Kaoru had said.

"Even so, I still love Ei-kun, and I think Ei-kun is the best. This isn't love towards a childhood friend. It's love towards a boy… is that not okay?"

"It's not *not* okay…"

"So that's why I decided, starting today, I won't be eating dinner at Ei-kun's house."

"Eh?"

Although many things happened today, this short statement actually shocked me the most.

"What? What did you just say?"

"I said, I don't intend to eat at Ei-kun's house anymore."

"W-Why, Chiwa!? What kind of strange food did you eat?!"

Seriously worried, I put my hand on her forehead to take her temperature. Strange. She didn't have a fever. What was going on?

"I'm perfectly normal!"

Chiwa shook away my hand.

"I thought about this for a very long time on the train. How could I, who always acted like a spoiled childhood friend, make you look at me like a girl? I kept thinking

and thinking, on and on, and I felt this was the only thing I could do.

"Why?! It's just a meal, and there's nothing wrong with eating together?"

However, Chiwa shook her head.

"Because if I'm depending on Ei-kun like that, I'll never be able to break away from my position as your childhood friend."

"…"

Chiwa's eyes were completely serious.

Because we've been together so long, I knew that when Chiwa had those kinds of eyes, she wouldn't give up no matter what.

"Then, how are you going to eat from now on?"

"I think I'll eat take-out or convenience store food temporarily, but I also plan on slowly learning how to cook. It's kind of embarrassing to never「know how to cook.

"Y-You want to cook!?"

The attack power of the statement far exceeded that of the previous one, and it surprised me.

In cooking class during home economics, Chiwa once negligibly tossed a tomato into beef stew saying,「this is so boring. The Chiwa who had this kind of worldly view actually wanted to cook?!

"Hey, can't we at least cook together? Eating is very important! Life is much much much much much much much more important than romance or whatever."

"Don't worry about me! It's no big deal. I can do it by myself!"

Chiwa slapped and rubbed her stomach, but at the same time, the sound of a growl echoed through the entire room.

Now, of course that wasn't my stomach.

Chiwa's face turned red again, but this time the reasons for it were different.

"Just then! That was just the speakers in my stomach!"

"…you…"

What kind of excuse was that? Though honestly, that wasn't much of an excuse at all.

"T-There's also one more thing I want to ask you!"

Chiwa seemed to be in a hurry to change the subject.

"Are you free tomorrow afternoon, Ei-kun?"

"I am. Next week cram school classes start again, but this week I have time."

"Then can you come with me to school, then?"

"You want to go to the club room?"

Chiwa listened and shook her head.

"Not Hane High. The Middle School. There's something I want to do at Hane Middle School."

This Hane Middle School was the middle school Chiwa and I both graduated from. Hanenoyama Middle School, in other words.

To me, that place was buried with the black history of the time when I had eighth-grade syndrome, so I didn't really want to go near there, but—

"Please. If you don't come, Ei-kun, there's no point."

If she said it like that, then I couldn't refuse.

Also, it probably had something to do with all the events that happened lately.

"I understand. Then let's meet in front of my house at one o'clock."

"Thank you! I love you the most, Ei-kun!"

She smiled sweetly at me, and for some reason my cheeks seemed to be burning.

Though—

It really made me uneasy that Chiwa said she wasn't going to eat dinner.

Could a person do things that seriously in the name of love?

Could love change a person to that extent?

For an Anti-Love person like me, there was no way I could understand.

Just when I walked out the door at the appointed time, I found Chiwa standing there dressed in casual clothes.

"Good afternoon, Ei-kun! You're just on time."

"That's obvious."

Since we arranged to meet at a place five seconds away from my front door, it was impossible for me to be late unless I overslept.

"Do you want to walk to school?"

"That's what I was planning, but do you want to take a bus?"

"Uhh…"

Today's sun was vicious like usual, so there was plenty of reason to take an air-conditioned bus, but—

"We haven't done this in a while, so let's walk to school like we used to."

"Mm! Mhm!"

Chiwa very happily nodded her head twice, and started to walk beside me.

When you compared the distance between our shoulders, there was a subtle fist-length of space between us.

…it was quite different than it used to be.

1. Chiwa leans against my shoulder.
2. 「I'm getting burnt to death! Go away.
3. 「What? What? Is Ei-kun embarrassed? Are you at that age boys yearn for love?
4. 「You're annoying! Shut up and be quiet!

That was our usual pattern.

This was the chain of events from「Plan: Escape from Childhood Friend. Even though I probably wouldn't be burnt to death, I always did find this to be rather strange.

"Hey, Chiwa, did you eat well yesterday?"

"Of course! I bought vegetables and meat from the groceries and stir-fried them. Though, I burned it a little."

What. This really was surprising.

"How did you season it?"

"With nothing special. I added barbecue sauce and ate it."

"Oh—I guess that's not bad."

That was because Chiwa always tries to make extra seasoning but always forgets. But I guess if it was stir-fried meat and vegetables, the nutrition should have been alright."

"Hey, Ei-kun. You worry so much. Am I really that unreliable?"

"No. It's just with respect to food… you might be able to catch up a little."

"No problem! I'll rely on barbecue sauce."

"I think you'll grow tired of that soon."

"No way. There's spicy flavor, sweet flavor, medium-hot… there's lots of choices."

Chihuahua had the expression of someone extremely experienced with this… no, you'll definitely become tired of it!

We passed the number four convenience store at the crossroads, and cut across the residential area through the alley. Even though there was only enough space for one car to pass through, one could shave a minute off the time needed to get to school by passing through here. During times we'd be late to class, you could say this minute made either life or death. In either case, this was a very important route for both of us back then.

"We haven't gone through here in a long while."

"That's because we'd only go through here on the way to Hane Middle School."

Just then—

A red truck just opposite of us turned right from the intersection into this tiny alley. The back of the truck was loaded with a mountain of wood, and it drew close to us as its low engine rumbled.

I gave a fright, and looked at Chiwa who was walking to the left of me.

Chiwa's face had turned white, and she was frozen in her steps as she stared at the truck. Her knees trembled slightly, and she clutched at the corner of my shirt hem.

"Don't worry about it. I'm with you."

I pulled Chiwa's arm, and pushed her against the cement wall. Then, I opened my legs and covered her delicate body with mine, as I waited for the truck to pass. The truck driver seemed to misunderstand something as he passed, and he continued to chuckle and watch us.

Chiwa's eyes were glued shut from the beginning to the end, and she only held onto my shirt.

"I-Is it gone? Did the truck pass?"

"Yeah, it's out of sight now."

Chiwa opened her eyes to confirm it, and then gave a sigh as if relieved.

"Sorry, Ei-kun. I even said I wouldn't depend on you yesterday."

"It's not a problem, this little thing!"

"I'm really useless. It's just a red truck, after all. It's okay if it's further away, but when it passes in front of me like that—"

"I said don't worry about it. Look. Just look at this cement wall. It's actually gray and gray colored. Yeah, this ordinary cement wall is gray colored. If it were red or blue, it'd be terrifying. Haha, it's no big deal! No big deal!"

I really hated myself for only being able to say such rushed and choppy consolations.

Last year in June, Chiwa got in a traffic accident with a truck, so she couldn't practice kendo anymore. Yeah, it just happened to be a red truck around that size. In the past, if she saw any kind of truck on the road, her legs would weaken, so right now you could say it was even an improvement.

But she couldn't forget about it entirely.

That's why I wanted to become a doctor, and cure Chiwa's body.

"Um... Um, Ei-kun?"

Chiwa squirmed shyly as she rotated her eyes and looked up towards me.

"If you maintain this uh, position, it might lead to some misunderstandings?"

"Huh?"

At that moment I came to my senses.

My body was pressed against Chiwa's and our faces were close... wasn't this basically a kissing posture? So that was what the truck driver was snickering about!

I hurriedly retracted my body, but Chiwa wound her arms around my back and properly hugged me.

"H-Hey! Chiwa?!"

"If your girlfriend saw you like this right now, it'd spell death."

From the way her voice sounded, she wasn't mischievous at all. Chiwa was serious.

"I like you so much, Ei-kun..."

"Wait—w-why are you saying that now?!"

"I said it yesterday, right? I want to speak out all the「Love I've kept hidden for nine years.

I never imagined she was serious about that.

While being hugged by Chiwa, I felt very unsure about where to place my hands. It felt very clumsy to keep it dangling, but if I held her, it'd basically mean that I accepted her.

Chiwa hugged me tightly, and repeated that「I love you... several times. I almost felt like I was being brainwashed.

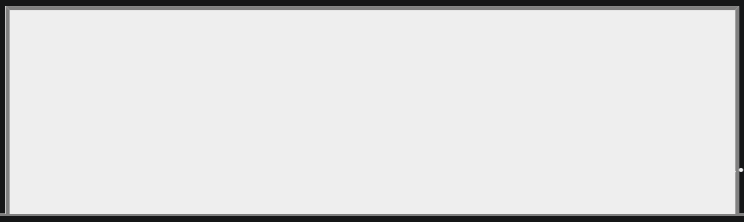
Just when I was stuck in this conundrum, unsure what to do, that famous RPG background music,「Equipped with a Cursed Weapon, started playing.

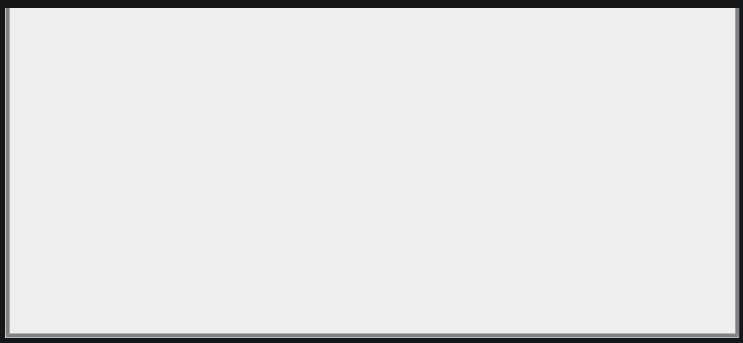
It came from the pocket in my pants.

"Ei-kun's cell phone?"

"Ah, yeah. It looks like a text."

This text message ringtone meant that the person who sent this was—

 .ne.jp



"Natsuzawa Masuzu! You bastard! You're watching us right now?!"

I faced the empty alleyway and shouted loudly—but there wasn't any response.

For a second, I thought we were being followed, but apparently that wasn't the case.

Masuzu's intuition was abnormally keen, and occasionally I receive texts that seemed like she was watching with her own eyes. I've even wondered if she had Stand Powers.

"Was that Natsuzawa's text just now?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Mm."

"I see. If that's the case, why don't we take a picture of us hugging and send it to her?"

"Do you want me to die?!"

"Just kidding. I'm making a joke."

Chiwa smiled and separated from my body. Without saying another word, she started walking forward.

"I'm really at my wit's end..."

I wiped the sweat on my forehead with my short sleeves.

Even when Chiwa and I were alone, my「girlfriend's presence never quite went away.

When we passed through the school gates that we haven't seen in half a year, we were greeted by the bust statue of the school's first headmaster.

"Hey Yotasuku! How are you?"

Chiwa lightly patted the corners of Nagashima Yotasuku's (1918-2000) shoulders, an old man forever old . Then she started walking in the direction of the athletics fields.

"Can we just walk in like that?"

"No problem. I contacted a teacher beforehand."

In other words, she went and found a teacher?

"Shouldn't you tell me what we're doing here at Hane middle school now?"

But Chiwa ignored me and didn't even offer a「you'll find out soon enough. She only stared out towards the fields.

Under the relentless glare of the sun, the softball club and baseball clubs were having a joint practice. This was a relatively frequent sight, since the infield of baseball club was shared with the outfield of the softball club.

"From what I remember, wasn't the softball club about to be shut down?"

"Back in our time, there were only four third-years and three second-years."

I remembered this because during competitions, they didn't have enough members, so Chiwa was frequently asked to give them a hand. Everyone said that once the the third years graduate, it'd be extremely difficult for the club to continue on.

We walked around the perimeter of the fields in order not to disturb their practice. Suddenly, a ball hit by the softball club rolled over across the boundary of the outfield.

The outfielder who came running waved her hand and shouted, "Sorry about that—Mhm."

"Hymph ♪"

Chiwa nimbly caught the rolling grounder and beautifully returned the ball with a flick of her wrist.

Perhaps because Chiwa threw the ball so beautifully, the outfielder stood gaping with wide eyes.

I was just thinking that, though I didn't realize—

"Excuse me, are you Harusaki Chiwa-senpai?"

"Huh?"

"You really are! It's me! Look!"

The outfielder took off her baseball cap that had been lowered to shield the sun, and revealed a faintly smiling tanned face.

"Ah—could you be Mitsuru? I haven't seen you in forever—!"

The two of them ran to each other and excitedly shook hands. It looked like they were acquaintances.

"You got new first-year members? That's great! Mitsuru, are you the captain?"

"Yup! This is all thanks to Chiwa-senpai."

The other softball club members also gathered around, and they gave shrieks and welcomes in close succession.

"Ah—! Harusaki-senpai!"

"Is this senapi the legendary person who helped the club?"

"I've always wanted to meet you! I'm really honored!"

Chiwa was crowded with barely any room to breath. Incredible praises like「this person, legendary, honored continued to appear.

A first-year with long braided hair spoke excitedly,

"I started playing softball because I admired Chiwa-senpai so much!"

"I wasn't even a proper softball club member in the past..."

"That doesn't matter! When I saw you hit three consecutive home-runs at three at-bats during the district tournament, I never imagined a girl could possibly

accomplish a feat like that. I was extremely, extremely moved!"

Chiwa lowered her head bashfully and scratched her nose as she faced the first-year with glittering eyes.

Ah—

I felt quite happy!

When Chiwa received so much praise, it made me happy as if I were the one being praised. I really wanted to let Masuzu, Hime, and Fuyuumi see this.

Because they seemed like they were in such high spirits, I discreetly slipped away from the scene. I, Kidou Eita, would elegantly make my exit and hang around the school.

"Ah...!"

At that moment, a first-year with a bob-cut hairstyle called out to me.

"Delivery guy person." [3]

"Huh?"

I inadvertently reacted, and the bob-cut girl covered her mouth, startled.

"Sorry, I didn't say anything."

"N-N-Never mind about that. But what did you just say? Delivery guy?"

"N-Nothing at all, really."

The bob-cut girl's face grew red, and she lowered her head.

What was going on?

No way... was I really that popular?!

After spending so many days being popular in「Jien-Otsu, did I unconsciously start emitting a popular pheromones?

Aghh, I'm deliberately anti-love too. Being popular is—

"Really, don't worry about it. Though to be honest I'm kind of curious about that「delivery guy part."

I gave a bright smile to help relieve the anxiety in my underclassman.

The bob-cut girl's expression seemed to relax slightly.

"Ah, it's something from when I was in sixth grade last year. On the way to school with my classmates, I'd often see senpai."

"Mhm."

"Senpai, you always wore these half-finger gloves to school right? Even in the summer."

".....yeah."

This conversation was getting weird.

"Your gloves were just like those of delivery guys. The part at the fingers were cut off, and there was something written on the back."

"..."

Damn the sweat that was beginning to drip!

"Because of that, I assumed you worked for an express delivery company, so I always called you「delivery guy person among my friends."

"E-Ehh~? Is that really true~? Was that really the case~?"

The third-year girls started to pursue the topic as I desperately tried to avert my eyes.

"Now that you mention it, I think I heard a rumor that Kidou-senpai frequently carried firecrackers around with him."

"F-F-F-F-F-Firecrackers? Who'd recklessly carry things like that around? It's not like it's a shrine festival?"

"You used to always shout「Annihilation!, but what did annihilation mean anyways?"

"I-It's just like the things people shout when they're really hyped up to do things, right? I don't think I did it *that* frequently. Occasionally, I guess. Just occasionally."

My shirt was becoming soaked with cold sweat, and I started backing off.

"Um, Chiwa, I won't bother you any more, so take your time!"

I openly gave a wave, and then ran away at full speed.

"Wait a minute Ei-kun! Where are you going?"

"I'll just wander around nearby!"

I shook off Chiwa's confused expression and voice, and I escaped into the school building from the east entrance.

God, that was dangerous.

This really was a dangerous place. There were so many landmines buried about. But since these were landmines that were buried when I had chuunibyou, I guess you could say I was reaping what I sowed.

I placed my sneakers in the shoe cupboard, put on the slippers for visitors, and walked inside. Since I wasn't wearing a uniform or carrying anything like a permit, it'd be a big hassle if I ran into a teacher.

Just when that thought crossed my mind, a fat teacher wearing the school's athletic outfit walked by from across the hall. I didn't recognize the face at all.

Since the situation was quite a hassle as I mentioned above, I simply hid in a nearby classroom.

I pressed myself against the blackboard, and waited for the sound of footsteps to pass.

...huh?

Didn't this used to be class 2-C's room?

The reason why I knew this was because there was a spot on the blackboard that was slightly sunken in. Although the depression wasn't deep enough that you'd notice it unless you looked carefully, I recognized it right away.

That was because the person who made that dent was me.

I'd hang myself if I thought about it in detail, so let's forget about that for now—though to recall, I became more cautious to gain favor in the eyes of others.

Although Masuzu and them all call me stupid pretty often, it shouldn't be a surprise that I've become timid after being embarrassed that often.

I waited for the the sound of footsteps to pass before I returned to the hallway, but this time I heard more steps approaching from the opposite direction.

It was a rather tall male student.

He wasn't wearing Hane middle school's uniform. Instead, he was wearing a blazer from from the most prestigious private school in the district.

I felt his face looked kind of familiar. When he noticed me, he spoke,

"Hey! Is that you, Kidou?"

"Yeah."

Although I responded, I couldn't remember who that person was. He wasn't in the same class as me, but I was certain he was in the same grade as me.

"Hey, did you forget about me? I even considered you to be my ultimate rival."

"Ultimate?"

"Yup. I'd never forget your name."

"Uhhh…"

If he said we were rivals like that, I should be able to remember him, right?

"I'm Inui… Inui Boshi."

"...I-Inui?"

Damn. Even when I heard his name, I didn't recognize him. This was making me feel annoyed, since I knew I've seen his face before.

"Perhaps it'd be easier to understand if I said I was the「captain of the boy's kendo team."

"Ah."

That's right. I've seen him at the kendo dojo.

Since Chiwa didn't have any worthy opponents among the girls, I'd remember that she'd often try to practice with him. But since Chiwa only mentioned it to me a few times, I naturally forgot his name.

When I thought about this, a rumor that I heard from Kaoru suddenly appeared in my head.

「*I heard that… when Chihuahua was in middle school, there was a guy who confessed to her.*

「*Huh? Who?*

「*The captain of the boy's kendo team. I thought everybody knew about this rumor. Did you not know?*

"So that was the case…"

That's why he never forgot about me.

From Inui's perspective at that time, he must have been very bothered by how Chiwa and I were always together.

"It looks like you've finally remembered."

His grin revealed white teeth. His smile was so candid, it wouldn't be surprising if he were in TV ads for sports drinks.

"You really are a merciless guy. To me, you're a rival in love you know."

"S-Sorry!"

In the past, I would have adamantly denied my status as a「rival in love, but at this point, there was no way I could deny it.

"Why apologize? Harusaki doesn't even look at me. It's rude of me to even say you're my love rival."

"That's not true. For Chiwa, being confessed to is a very rare experience."

As soon as I said that, Inui gave a flabbergasted look.

"What are you talking about? I'm not the only one who likes Harusaki-san."

"Huh?"

"I'm only aware of three others myself. There's one each from the basketball club, soccer club, and swimming team. I think there are other clubs that have her fans."

"..."

Is he joking?

If Inui was speaking the truth, Chiwa was actually popular in middle school.

Was I the only one who never noticed?

In other words, the more Chiwa took part in「Jien-Otsu activities, the more unpopular she got…?

"T-That's so depressing!"

"What's wrong, Kidou? Did you get dizzy from standing?"

To be honest, I really did feel like I was dizzy.

"Girls like Harusaki-san are really cute, right? There are a lot of boys who try to get close to her with ulterior motives—"

"O-Oh."

My responses were getting incomprehensible.

So all along, people actually saw Chiwa as cute...

This really surprised me.

"But, she's actually popular because of her looks. Anyone who's had club activities with her, knows this well. Exactly. She's not like any ordinary girl. Even if it's a little embarrassing to say this—she's dazzling, especially when Harusaki practices kendo."

Now that I think of it, Masuzu said something like this before too.

—That girl is so dazzling.

"Do you know why she rejected me when I confessed to her that time?"

"No. I have no idea."

"She said,「There is someone I've always liked. Even if she said it ambiguously like that, the person she's referring to is you, Kidou, right?"

"W-W-What?"

"Hahaha. Don't be so embarrassed about it."

Even if he said so, I couldn't control how my cheeks burned.

"Anyways, everyone's very clear about this. That's why even though there's many people who like Harusaki , I'm the only one who's ever confessed. The reason is because nobody wants to be a kamikaze pilot."

"...Why did you, Inui, decide to go for it?"

"Huh?"

Inui looked tongue-tied as if he had been attacked.

"You have a point. Hmm, how should I put it—I liked her so much I couldn't help it. Even though she had someone she liked, but I couldn't stop my feelings, so it just happened."

"...how cool."

That's what I thought from the bottom of my heart.

Hane middle school's boy's kendo club was as impressive as the girl's club. They had a lot of members, but after talking to this club captain, I realized that with this guy as captain, he could really lead all the members of the club.

Just then, Inui became shy and fidgety with his enormous body.

"I'm not cool at all. And actually, I have a new lover in high school now."

"Oh, that's impressive."

That girl is lucky to have gotten this guy. Even though I was anti-love, I couldn't help but bless him.

"Ah seriously. It's a waste for such a cute person to be together with me. So sweet and understanding. Every day, there's even a bento for me—ah, if you don't believe me, do you want to see a picture?"

What kind of cute girl was she? I peered over at the smartphone he presented.

The liquid crystal screen showed two extremely round eyes.

White skin.

...a very short haircut.

Square-jawed face—

".....it's a guy?"

"Yup, a guy."

Inui for some reason pushed out his chest and happily spoke,

"My relationship with him after starting high school in the kendo club was really good. Although the gender barrier is a problem—there's nothing I can do since I love him!"

"There's nothing you can do about it—!? Do you actually intend to insist on that?!"

Inui happily brought his smartphone against his chest and curled around it.

"Even if he's a boy, I can't stop my feelings if I love him ."

"Control yourself a little—!"

"Actually there's several other things that have become difficult to control, like incontinence."

"Enough! I don't want to hear anymore!"

It took so much trouble to get the conversation good!

How did the conversation topic manage to turn into homosexuality!? There's no way I could calm down like this! What conspiracy was this?!

"Oh, it's this late already?"

Inui looked at his watched and patted my shoulder.

"It's about time to get going, Kidou."

"N-No! I don't want to go to your place! When I entered high school, I pledged not to let people mistake me as gay!"

"Don't misunderstand."

Inui took my shaking head at wits end.

"Weren't you asked by Harusaki to come here? Since that's the case, our destination should be the same."

"Huh?"

I stopped making a ruckus and looked at Inui's face.

"Chiwa also asked you to come?"

"Yes."

Inui nodded with a substantial margin.

"In order for her to enter that place again, she'll need an extraordinary amount of awareness and resolution. So at the end of it, the person she wants to see the most is definitely you."

♦

The place that Inui took me to was the kendo dojo located behind the school.

On the floor that had been wiped sparkling clean, kendo club members wearing protective equipment sparred each other. It looked like they were actually in the middle of practice.

In our middle school years, this was a place that Chiwa and I often stopped by at on the way home. For a person born booksy like me, the hot blooded enthusiasm here was difficult to bear. Since the ceiling was rather high, the dojo didn't actually get swamped with heat, but just looking at them made my back start sweating.

And then—

"Look, you're just using your hands! Your gripping hands don't need to exert force. Rely on your waist to generate hitting power! Kendo is dependent on your waist!"

A particularly energetic voice interwove with the intense shouts of the kendo dojo.

A person was earnestly teaching basic movements beside a first year wearing a completely new set of protective gear.

The instructor was Chiwa.

"Look in the mirror across you and pay attention to your posture. Use your head and body to copy the demonstration I just did for you."

Chiwa had a solemn expression I very rarely saw these days as she made strikes and gave suggestions—it was like she had returned to being the old Chiwa.

…

It made me happy.

It really made me feel so happy.

The opportunity to see Chiwa look like this made me so happy.

"Was this what she wanted to show you?"

Inui narrowed his eyes as he stood next to me.

"It's been about a year since she's last shown up at this dojo. Ever since that accident, she's never come close to this place."

Right.

Even though that accident happened and she wasn't able to practice kendo, Chiwa was always hesitant to show up at the dojo. Even when it came to picking up her protective equipment and personal items, I was the one who picked them up for her.

I never asked her the reason, but I always felt I understood why.

Since she couldn't practice kendo, it would have been painful to return to the dojo—that must have been the reason.

Her goal to compete at nationals, which you could consider a「final summer dream, had always been abandoned and preserved here.

And like this, after a full year, Chiwa's finally returned . This meant...

"Ah! Ei-kun!"

Chiwa noticed that I was standing at the dojo entrance, and ran over like she was skating on the wooden floor.

"Where did you go? I sent quite a few text messages to you earlier."

"Sorry, I didn't notice."

Inui lightly raised his hand,

"We happened to bump into each other earlier, and I brought him over."

"I haven't seen you in forever Inui! Thanks for coming! "

Chiwa smiled widely.

"It must have been since May, right? I kept being asked to become a coach. This year you guys received no less than twenty new members, so it was really difficult to manage them all, so you asked me to come help whenever at I had free time. I was really worried about what I should do—"

"It looks like you're pretty happy, no matter how I look at you."

I said after she spoke. Chiwa nodded widely.

"I wanted to show you two that I'm fine now. Back then, I gave you guys in the boy's kendo club a lot of trouble. Inui can count as their representative, and Ei-kun can count as the representative for the「Maiden's Club."

"Maiden's Club?"

Chiwa explained it to the confused Inui who had his head tilted,

"It's a new team that I joined at Hane high school. I have a new goal just like winning kendo nationals. Now it's club activities with a dream of becoming beautiful."

"...Harusaki's so incredible."

Inui sighed as he shook his head.

"You found a new goal, and you're striding in that direction with all your strength. That's incredible. I really admire it."

"That's not true. It's all thanks to Ei-kun's efforts."

Chiwa looked at me and smiled.

"I see. I understand why I was rejected now."

Even Inui looked at me.

"...W-What?"

What was with these two people? Why were they fawning over me? It made me really uncomfortable.

"Goodbye then, handsome young man."

Inui patted the shoulders of my dumbstruck self, and he left first.

"What about you, Ei-kun? I'll be a little late, so you can go home first."

"Id—iot!"

I rapped Chiwa's forehead.

"Of course I'll wait for you."

"...oh."

"I'm going to look around here and watch the brave swordsman Chihuahua coach until the very end. Then, I'll report it all to Hime and the rest of them, since I'm the representative, right?"

In order to not disturb their practice, I sat down in the corner of the dojo.

Chiwa stared at my face for a little while, and then,

"—Hey, you're using only your hands to wave the sword again! When you make strikes, pay attention to your footwork!"

She returned her attention back to coaching her underclassmen again.

In that split second, for barely an instant—Chiwa's expression looked almost like she was holding back tears . I guess that was probably because she was still keeping a secret from everybody.

When practice was over, the skies outside were dark.

"Sempai, please come teach us again in the future—!"

"In the autumn competition, I'll be sure to surpass the upperclassmen and show you the results! Definitely!"

The underclassmen girls from the kendo club all came to bid us farewell, and we walked out the school gates.

Chiwa kept turning back and waving to them; on the other hand, I shyly shrunk my body, unable to keep up with the enthusiasm of athletes.

When we were far enough away that the school building couldn't be seen, Chiwa lightly hugged my right arm as we walked alone.

"I really need to thank you for today… thank you so much."

"O-okay."

The delicate touch of Chiwa's body made my voice inadvertently distort.

"E-kun, I love you."

"I know that already! You don't need to say it that many times! How many times have you said it today?"

"I said it before. I'll keep telling you many many times that I… love you."

Through my clothes, I gradually started to feel Chiwa's body heat. Chiwa exhaled near her neck as she

repeatedly murmured about「love.... Seriously, it was enough. I basically wanted to run away.

"L-Let's put that aside for now."

I coughed and cleared my throat, and calmly arranged the events that had happened today in my head.

The dividing line that had separated Chiwa and me in the past had taken a step forward.

Since that was the case, I knew I needed to make a clear response.

Because I couldn't violate my agreement with Masuzu—at least, as far as the limit would allow.

"Hey, Chiwa."

"Hm?"

"I'm Natsukawa Masuzu's boyfriend."

"...I know."

"That's why I can't return your feelings. At least, I can't in these three years of high school."

Chiwa's face had an incomprehensible look as she looked up to me,

"You're only going to date Natsukawa for three years?"

"What will happen in the future is uncertain. Even if we're lovers right now, you never know when we might break up."

Yes.

It was just like my missing parents. You never knew when they're formally going to fall apart.

Even if Chiwa said she「loves me right now, you never know if her feelings will change in three years. You never know what will happen tomorrow. True love is just like that.

"I get it!"

Chiwa let go of my arm, and lightly hopped onto the ridge that separated the sidewalk from the road.

"I know that you don't intend to break up with Natsukawa, Ei-kun. However, since you say that「what will happen in the future is uncertain, basically you *could* break up with your girlfriend tomorrow!"

Ugh.

That really was an optimistic way of looking at it.

"I guess you could put it that way."

"Then there's only one thing I need to do!"

She extended a finger out to me and pointed.

"I'll work harder during Maiden's Club activities, and I'll become a girl even cuter and more popular than Natsukawa—then I'll steal Ei-kun away for everyone to see."

"...I don't think that's any different from the past."

"Yeah?"

Chiwa chuckled.

Everything will turn out alright you could say. Though there was still a very very long road to travel before I could be liberated from mayhem.

"Since that's the case, then I also have something to say ."

"What is it?"

I looked away from Chiwa and gazed up towards the orange-dyed sky in the west.

"You can occasionally, um, come over to eat dinner. It's very tiring to make only one portion of food."

"..."

"D-don't worry yourself over being dependent or not dependent! Anyone can eat dinner at my place, so don't think too much about it!"

Chiwa whispered in a low voice,

"Ei-kun, could you be very lonely?"

Lonely!?

"W-W-Who's lonely you idiot! I'm just concerned about your nutrition and digestive health!"

"..... ♪"

Chiwa's hairband changed direction as it fluttered. She hugged me from the front.

"Let go! You're roasting me to death! Let go alreadyyyy!"

Even if I struggled and thrashed with my hands and feet, Chiwa's arms tightly wrapped themselves around my back and refused to let go. It felt like she had completely returned to the enthusiasm she had prior to the club trip.

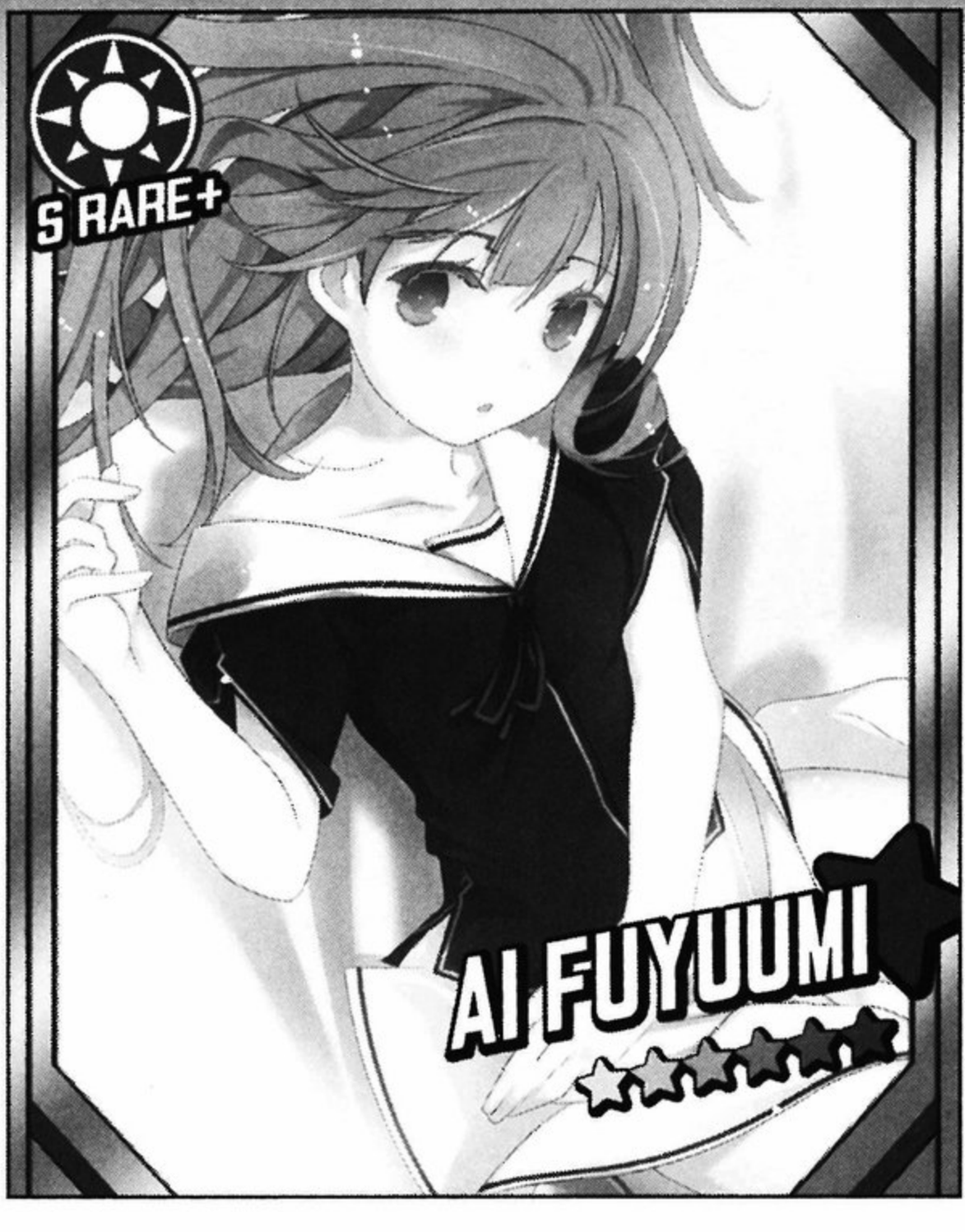
"Ei-kun, I love you I love you! I love you!"

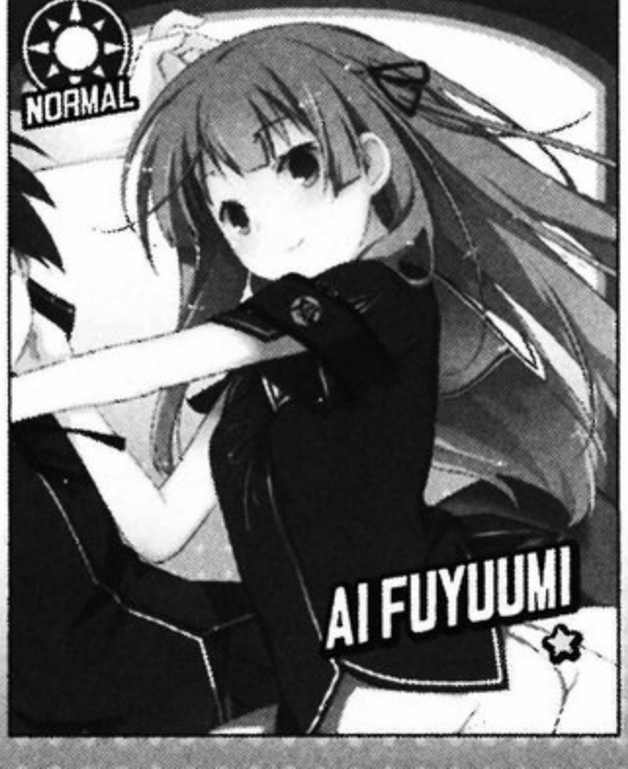
"Just let go alreadyyyyyyyyyy!"

If time could continue on just like this, it would be great.

Even if I was anti-love, I couldn't help but think this way.

【モテカワ風紀委員】冬海愛衣





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特技：お外を走る

♥プロフィール♥

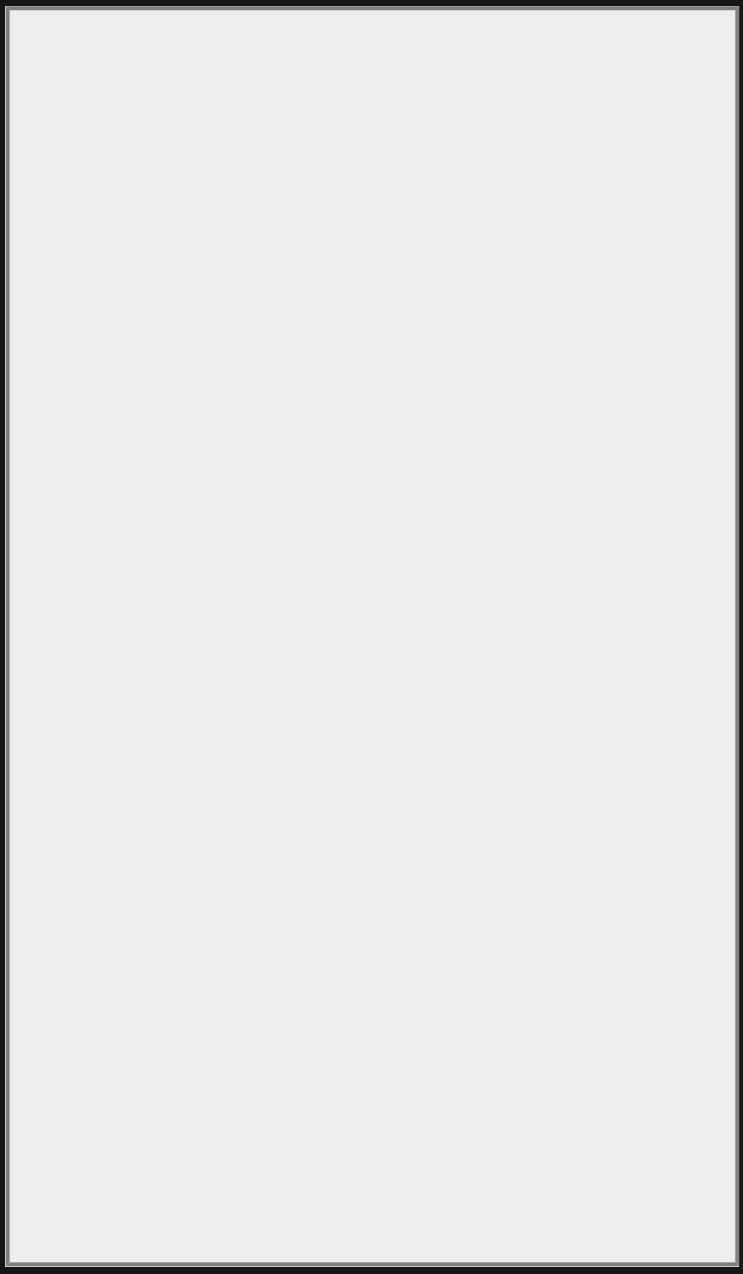
「この学校の風紀は彼氏持ちの私が守るわ！」

♥親愛度UP♥

「愛衣ちゃん小勝利っ♪」

♥親愛度MAX♥

「愛衣ちゃん大勝利！ おそとはしってくる♪」



#2: Ai, Discipline and Love is Difficult to Manage

#2 愛衣、風紀と恋のイタばさみ？

It was lunch break at summer cram school.

Just when I disposed of my lunch at the cram school cafeteria—

"Hey, Ta-kun, when are you going to break up with that girl?"

Fuyuumi Ai asked this across from me while eating her bento, nearly causing me to drop my rice ball.

"...Huh?"

"What do you mean by,「Huh?"

"I didn't…「Huh?"

"Huh?"

As we meaninglessly exchanged repeated「Huh's, Asoi Kaoru, who was sitting next to us, switched looking between the two of us.

"What are Eita and Ai-chan talking about?"

Don't leave me out of this—Kaoru patted my shoulder. What was with this guy? He's so cute.

"Last week during our club trip, Ta-kun stamped it!"

"Huh? What does 'stamp' mean?"

"This!"

Fuyuumi happily took out the「Marriage Registration Forum.

In the spot below the place where I had written my name in kindergarten, there was a red thumbprint. This was the place that my finger had accidentally touched when I was bleeding.

I already told this to Fuyuumi many times already, but —

"It's still best if we submit the application form after the two of us return from our high school graduation ceremony. Though, last night I was dreaming… no, I was considering if we submitted it a day earlier and announced our marriage to the entire school on the stage during graduation, that wouldn't be bad at all ♪"

She wasn't willing to listen to me at all since she was entirely bent on her plan to get married immediately.

"That's great, Eita. I wish you happiness."

"Wait a second! Kaoru, why are you running so far away?!"

For some reason, my best friend had shifted to the seat farthest away on our table!

"Oh dear, I never expected there would be a wedding contract in this. This time, even I am shocked."

"I just said it was a misunderstanding! There's no way I can get married, right? This girl is just rambling things by herself!"

"Heyyy, Ta-kun, when are you going to break up with that girl?"

Fuyuumi Ai simply wasn't listening. She was apparently very adamant about her first question.

"By 'that girl', which girl are you referring to?"

"Natsukawa Masuzu. Even if you put Chiwa and Himecchi to the side for now, you'll at the very least need to dissolve your relationship with your girlfriend."

If you took the marriage part out, those words did actually have a little bit of sense.

Since my agreement with Masuzu was supposed to last until we graduated from high school, by the time that came, I needed to have an answer.

"Fine, I won't announce it right now. Until Ta-kun's made a decision, I'll protect the secret of our marriage."

"...ohh."

I gave a sigh of relief. I was actually worried that she'd start spreading this news everywhere. Fortunately, we've apparently avoided that bad outcome.

Kaoru returned to a nearby seat, and tilted his head out of incomprehension.

"But is that alright? If you announce your engagement, you'd even perhaps be a step ahead in the battle for Eita."

"Hehe! Ai-chan is a woman that knows how to wait, hm?"

Fuyuumi Ai had the look of an expert at love (no qualifications of having a boyfriend = age). What was up with this girl's lovestruck brain?

Fuyuumi gingerly folded up the marriage contract, and put it back into her makeup bag.

After Kaoru finished his strawberry milk, he used his handkerchief to wipe his mouth.

"If that thing is so important to you, wouldn't it be better if you didn't carry it around with you?"

"Exactly. This obviously isn't the original copy."

The chopsticks clattered as they slipped from my hands.

"You photocopied it?"

"Yup! Only about a thousand copies."

"..."

The back of my shirt slowly started to become soaked with cold sweat.

"I photocopied it at the convenience store, but I actually forgot the original copy when I left. The cashier even went out of her way to chase after me."

The scene seemed to emerge in Fuyuumi's brain, and she was immersed in it.

"The cashier lady smiled at me and said,「You're so blessed!."

"Don't you think she might be laughing at you for some other reason—?!

Why was it like this...

Normally she was such a steadfast disciplinary committee member, but the moment this girl encountered love, she's become an idiot!

"Ta-kun, can you come see the president?"

Ai brought this up on the way back from cram school.

"Which president are you talking about?"

"Of course it's the president of the disciplinary committee."

The two of us were walking on a street by the shopping center arch near the cram school. Kaoru went home first because of prior engagements, so it was only the two of us.

Walking with Fuyuumi on the street wasn't as bad as it was with Masuzu, but we still gathered the envious glares of boys around us. In the very beginning, I hated it , but recently I've become more and more happy about it. This wasn't because I was basking in a sense of superiority. Rather, when I thought about how many people would flee once they realized there was a 「Marriage Registration Form involved, it made me feel pleased; I realized it was probably sadistic of myself to think that way.

"Does Ta-kun know the Hane High School disciplinary committee members much?"

"You could say so."

The members of the Hanenoyama Prefectural High School disciplinary committee wielded incredible power. Among the alumni, there were presidents of famous companies and politicians. They had unmatchable influence over our school. There's even a rumor that as

long as one can become the president of the disciplinary committee, one can easily go to a local top-tier company and get hired.

I heard that the current president of the disciplinary committee was a rich third-year girl pampered by her father who was a county representative. I've only ever seen her at school assemblies, and I felt she was completely that kind of high-class person.

"Why do I have to meet such an intimidating person?"

"Before vacation, wasn't there that incident when the club was about to be shut down?"

"Yeah, after you brought up shutting down the club, you canceled it yourself in the very end."

That really was Jien-Otsu! [4]

"Even now, there's still pretty big clamor among the disciplinary committee that the Maiden's Club is a problem. Although I said I'd strictly supervise you all, they weren't willing to accept it without convening a conference—"

"So that's why you want to me go?"

That really didn't make sense. Why did it have to be me?

"In this kind of situation, shouldn't you ask Natsukawa since she's the club president?"

Fuyuumi immediately dished out an astonished expression from the bottom of her heart.

"Hey, what do you think will come out of it if we drag Natsukawa-san to that kind of place?"

"...oh, right. Sorry."

In front of the serious disciplinary committee, Masuzu would almost certainly talk back with her venomous tongue and JOJO references. We knew this already.

No person would enjoy a taste of that kind of shocking experience.

"Also, I want Ta-kun to meet with the president once."

"Huh? Why is that?"

"Because during our marriage, I want to ask her to become our witness."

I abruptly stopped in my tracks.

"Huh? What? What did you say?"

"Is Ta-kun thirsty? Want to stop by the convenience store?"

"Don't change the subject! What did you just say?!"

Fuyuumi ignored my shouts and quickly walked into the convenience store.

...

I was starting to feel like the moat around me was gradually being filled in.[5]

Marriage registration form, marriage ceremony, marriage witness.

How serious did you intend to go, Ai-chan?!

♦

Maybe it'd be better to pick an unlucky day as opposed to a good-luck day? [6]

The next evening, after cram school ended, Fuyuumi and I went to the disciplinary committee room together.

"So you're Kidou Eita-kun?"

She gracefully tilted her porcelain teacup as she asked.

Her huge shapely eyes, graceful curved eyebrows, and fully straight nose, put together with extremely soft-looking, wavy and smooth hair gave her entire body the look of nobility and grace.

Although she possessed the air and merits of a rich girl , she had this one droopy strand of hair that stuck up (in other words, an「antenna), so it actually looked kind of funny. Like this, you could say instead of a President, she's become a Preside~. [7]

This was the third-year president of the Hanenoyama High School disciplinary committee, Ishige Mari-senpai.

"Thank you for taking a trip out here. It must have been a hassle for Fuyuumi-san."

"It's not troubling at all, Ishige-senpai!"

Fuyuumi's back was very tight and straight. Was she nervous? Her expression was rather stiff.

There were more than ten girls crammed in this room that was about the same size as the 「Jien-Otsu clubroom. I had heard the rumors before, but there really wasn't a single boy among the disciplinary committee. Since it literally was a matriarchy, it made a boy like me very uncomfortable.

"So, let's sit?"

Fuyuumi and I sat on seats next to the door, while the president sat in a seat across from us flanked by three committee members. The remaining members without seats stood 「at-ease, and waited beside the president. It was practically a military brigade.

"This is practically like a military brigade—is that what you were thinking?"

Ishige-senpai revealed an elegant smile, as if she could see through my thoughts.

"Their loyalty and sense of responsibility is indeed comparable to that of soldiers. However, they're not exactly loyal to me—they're defending the values of the school discipline. I hope you won't forget that, because I'm simply loyal to responsibility, that's all."

"I see…"

I responded absentmindedly, as my eyes stayed fixed on the hair antenna that swayed in the air conditioning. If I kept my eyes there, I wouldn't get nervous at all.

"Kidou-kun is always number one in the grade for midterm exams, right? From my understanding, you are a serious student deeply committed to your studies."

"That's right, I can attest that he is an extremely outstanding student."

Fuyuumi stuck out her chest as she said this, and the senpai nodded her head substantially.

"I heard that when you started high school, your grades abruptly skyrocketed. Is that because you had a change of heart, and got born again wholly dedicated to studying?"

"No, that's an overstatement."

There was an itch in my back.

What was with this praise? The reason they called me here couldn't have been to praise my grades.

Since earlier, Senpai's eyes looked like they were examining me and making an evaluation.

The two committee members to her left and right had similar actions. A second-year with glasses and braids gazed steadily at me as she took notes. On the right, a third-year with a ponytail had her arms crossed as she stared.

"However, considering your personal lifestyle, there's nothing worthy of praise."

After the praise from seconds ago, it switched to belittlement.

"You clearly already have Natsukawa Maszu-san as your girlfriend, but you still continue to seduce Harusaki Chiwa-san and Akishino Himeka-san. Whether you look at it ethically or from common sense, there's definitely something very suspicious here."

The committee members around us echoed with「that's right, that's right. I even heard some brazen and filthy-sounding voices.

"That wasn't me seducing, They're initiating it themselves—"

"Are you saying that they're taking their own initiative to tangle with you? You don't look particularly like that kind of bishounen[8] character."

Senpai used a slender finger to press down on the teacup dish, which clattered slightly.

"Actually, I've come up with a hypothesis:「The Society for Bringing Out Your Maiden Self is actually a harem that Kidou Eita set up after exploiting the weaknesses of pitiable girls."

"Why me?!"

"Of course, that's only my fantasy. But considering your circumstances, the people around you take that perspective and think it's strange."

"No way!"

Fuyuumi kicked her chair aside and stood up.

"Ta-kun definitely isn't hot at all! He's one of those mass-produced models, and you couldn't get more ordinary than this ordinary idiot! But then again, a man's value isn't just in their looks!"

"...Who's Ta-kun?"

Senpai looked stunned. Even her hair antenna looked like it was in a「? shape.

Fuyuumi deeply lowered her hand and said「I'm sorry !. This was Ai-chan Epic Loss. That being said, was she taking advantage of the mess to hit on me?

Senpai gave a sigh and stood up with a nod. She opened the window to let the air inside.

The white curtains wavered slightly, and the damp evening breeze entered the room.

"It look's like I've said too much."

Senpai's tone turned soft.

However, her expression continued to be cold.

"Anyhow, I hope you understand my perspective. I dispatched a very important underclassman to an unknown club. It's a very uneasy experience—"

Her antenna hair wobbled from the wind that blew in from the window.

I pretended I didn't see her antenna hair and asked,

"When you say 'uneasy', specifically what do you mean?"

"That Fuyuumi-san would also suffer from your evil scheme!"

Her hair antenna snapped straight like a fang with a 「snap!.

"When I graduate, Fuyuumi-san must have the ability to prop up the disciplinary committee. It is not an overstatement to say that the future of this school rests on her shoulders."

The third-year with a ponytail nodded her head in agreement.

"Fuyuumi's understanding of discipline is incredibly high. Even upperclassmen like me cannot help but learn from her."

The second-year with glasses also repeatedly nodded.

"Ai-chan also needs to balance clubs, yet she doesn't leave any work unfinished. She goes to the Maiden's Club after school, but in the morning she gets here very early to clean and arrange the papers. I really admire her."

From around us, heavenly praises like「Ai-chan is awesome or Ai-chan is the best! echoed.

In contrast, how low was my evaluation? Though, some parts of it were overestimated.

"If Fuyuumi gets rolled into your「mayhem, it'll be immense damage to the disciplinary committee. I'm going to retire in the fall, so I want to leave without any worries on my mind.

"I see."

From the disciplinary committee's perspective, we were the ones who dragged Fuyuumi in. Though to be honest, Fuyuumi jumped in herself and worsened the mayhem.

"Then, how can I prove it to you all that I won't put a hand on Fuyuumi?"

"—come take a test."

Senpai straightened her finger and hair antenna.

"Let us test if you're really a morally upright and honest guy ourselves. If you fail, I'll forbid Fuyuumi-san from going to you club."

"Why is that…?!"

Fuyuumi protested, but after Senpai silenced her with a glare, she quieted down.

"Okay, then let's test it."

I made a firm resolution and nodded.

After all, I had foreseen long ago that it would end up like this. Even though I didn't know what kind of test it would be, I'd just have to demonstrate my true nature as an anti-love person.

"Then, what is the test?"

"Go to the roof."

Her hair antenna towered in the sky as if pointing out directions.

"My eyes have seen through many students who have violated the rules of the school—I'll let you experience it for yourself!"

I led the hoard of disciplinary committee members to the roof.

On the way there, students who were at school for club activities raised their eyebrows at me.「Kidou-kun has a bunch of new girls again There's so many… Does he plan to make the entire disciplinary committee to join his harem?! They seemed to look at me quite incredibly. Just by listening to these comments at school, Ishige-senpai's concerns were starting to make sense.

It was four thirty in the afternoon, and the sky was still bright.

The afterglow of the setting sunlight reflected on the tiles, as the crowd took in the panorama from the roof. My back was against the wall, and I faced the legion of disciplinary committee members. Fuyuumi stood between us, looking distressed.

"So, how do you intend to test me?"

"Hmph… if you thought we were merely reserved disciplinary committee members, then you've been gravely mistaken!"

Senpai gave a fearless smile and pointed at me.

"In order to suppress the improper relationships between boys and girls, we've realized the need to develop proficient skills in love. In other words, we need to be the people in this school who can love the best and best and best and best! We must be familiar with this!"

Yeahh—! The committee members gave cheers.

That being said, Ishige-senpai's face was very red. Could she be less embarrassed, please?

"R-Right now, the elite members of the disciplinary committee will try to s-s-s-s-s-seduce you! And if you're tempted, you lose! If you remain unaffected, then you pass!"

Wasn't this just like something 「Jien-Otsu would do? I guess you could say they were just as bad.

"Then, let us begin."

Senpai raised her right hand, and the the second-year with plaited hair braids immediately walked in front of me.

At first glance, she looked rather plain. However, upon careful examination, she was actually a pale-skinned beauty. She overflowed with a empty-headed sensation, a little bit like Hime.

Hime's lookalike was expressionless, and she only stared at me.

I had thought she would say something enticing, or use some sexy methods to seduce me. I never expected she would just stand there blankly without doing anything.

"You…?"

Just when I was starting to get impatient.

Hime's lookalike slowly took off her glasses, and closed her right eye.

Then she immediately put her glasses back on, and returned to her original expressionless look.

"What was that?"

"A wink."

Yeah, I knew that.

"When I take off my glasses, aren't I cute?

"Yeah, I guess you could say you're cute."

"Are you captivated by me?"

"No, not to that extent."

When I said that, Hime's lookalike had a shocked expression,

"W-Why is that!?"

"Well, you asked me why…"

Did this girl read too much shoujo manga? Basically, she was about the same as Chiwa?

Senpai came forward and made an announcement," Let's stop here."

"Let's consider that you passed the first test. Are beauties who take off their glasses too old-fashioned?"

I don't think this has anything to do with being old-fashioned or new.

"Hmph. Let's see if you can withstand the next one."

Senpai snapped her fingers, and this time the tall third-year with a ponytail walked forward. Her appearance was very proper, but her eyes were too sharp and seemed rather intimidating.

She lifted her chin and crossed her arms,

"Don't misunderstand me, because I don't like you one bit."

—It sounded like she was reading from a script.

"Don't misunderstand me, but I'm just passing by, that's all."

"...Okay."

"Don't misunderstand me, but it's not particularly because I want to see you."

"I know."

"Don't misunderstand me, it's not particularly, that, um. In other words, don't misunderstand me."

"..."

What kind of move was this?"

I simply didn't understand what this was doing. No, actually I did know, but I didn't want to know.

The disciplinary committee members watched me and whispered,

"So he's even unmoved by Yamada-senpai's hellish 4-hit tsundere COMBO? [9]

"What's wrong with that guy? Is he homo?" [10]

They quite rudely misunderstood me.

But these guys... they really are an exceedingly pitiful group. If they had a competition with「Jien-Otsu, it should be rather interesting, huh?

"Then, I guess I can get going now."

"Don't joke around! The test isn't over yet."

Senpai's antenna hair swayed left and right, and she walked in front of me.

"I will be the final one to s-seduce you! But, since this is just a test, d-d-don't think it's the real thing!"

Her face was fully red, and her voice was rather sharp.

Fuyuumi anxiously wrinkled her brow.

"Um, Ishige-senpai, you don't have to go to this extent, right?"

"No! Fuyuumi-san! If we retreat now, it'll harm the disciplinary committee's reputation. I will definitely rout him for you to see!"

Senpai brought her fingers to the ribbon on her uniform, and with a swish she undid it. After she loosened it, her face grew red again, as if she surprised herself with her own behavior. Her teary eyes seemed to say,「What am I going to do with myself!?.

"I-I'm going to make my move now."

Senpai's voice trembled, and then she collapsed in my direction.

Instinctively, I used my chest to catch her.

Senpai's knees continued to tremble unceasingly, and she was shaking so much it transferred onto my body.

Since her upper body was tightly pressed against mine , I could hear her heartbeat with zero delay.

...not good.

Even I was starting to get perturbed.

"W-What do you think? Is it no big deal even like this? "

Senpai actually very nearly made me feel breathless with her teary eyes staring at me... it really made my heart beat.

Her fair floated with a scent like flowers, and there was this feeling of some bulging object that certainly

wasn't small under her uniform. Her shuddering eyelashes and her soft lips all made my heartbeat accelerate.

"If you're going to surrender, feel f-free to anytime. Otherwise, I'm going to fall over..."

This girl was so cute.

Even if she was a senpai, this expression was just like that of a little girl.

...n-not good.

If this continues, I'll fail this test.

N-No! I won't be moved by her!

Even if Senpai's cute, she doesn't match up with Chiwa .

Even if Senpai's beautiful, she doesn't match up with Masuzu.

Even if Senpai's delicate, she doesn't match up with Hime.

Even if Senpai is fascinating, she—

"Noooooooooooooooooo————!"

Suddenly, someone crashed into me from the side.

I gave an embarrassing「Wuahh! as I rolled across the roof and collided into the wall.

Senpai didn't roll, but she tumbled onto her butt on the floor.

The person who crashed into us was—Fuyuumi.

Out of breath, she snuffled through her nose like a child.

"Ta-kun is Ai-chan's! Even the revered Senpai can't touch him! I prohibit anyone from touching him!"

—Ah, now she's done it...

Why can't you control yourself, Ai-chan? Now all the effort we spent is going to fizzle away!

As expected, the disciplinary committee members were dumbstruck.

Senpai was also similarly awestruck, but not after long she coughed and trembled,

"I-Impossible. Could you have already fallen for this man?"

Fuyuumi's eye went wide with a「Ah!?, and she looked at me with a face that looked like it was about to cry.

"Did Ai-chan really do that?"

"I had no idea about this!"

This really was very frightening.

But the damage was already done.

Senpai's face flushed red, but this time it was with a completely different feeling than earlier.

"Is the reason why you wanted to monitor the Maiden's Club because of him? You're a disciplinary committee member, but you've become captivated by a boy?"

Fuyuumi was like a soaked rabbit, and she trembled.[11] Without any real comprehensibility, she tried to explain herself: 「No, thats— That one...

But not after long, she realized it was pointless.

"...I'm sorry. Senpai is right, I'm already his girl."

She crestfallenly admitted the facts.

"I've misjudged you. So you were this kind of person...!"

Senpai's hands forcibly turned into fists.

Her antenna hair, seething with anger, pointed at Fuuyimi.

"You are no longer a part of the disciplinary committee! I don't care if you go with that guy together to that club!"

I chased after Fuyuumi who ran off the roof.

"Wait, Fuyuumi!"

I chased after her fluttering hair and the back of her uniform, and sprinted as fast as I could in the hallway that connected the east and west buildings.

Since it was summer vacation, there weren't any students or teachers. I could run as much as I liked, but it wasn't something I was particularly happy about.

"Come back and say everything clearly! Hey, Fuyuumi ! Ai-chan!"

But Fuyuumi didn't stop running. She skipped two steps of stairs and ran downstairs, and rushed outside even though she was still wearing her indoor shoes.

"H-Her legs are so fast!"

This was the second time Fuyuumi made me run.

The first time, I was actually running away from Fuyuumi, but this time it was the opposite.

We chased circles around the school walls, after which we ran towards the flowerbed.

When we ran by the athletics fields, the baseball club that was putting away their equipment stared at us with unfathomable expressions.

"I said Ai-chan! Wait a moment!"

I didn't know if it was because of my shouts or because she's simply ran herself tired, but Fuyuumi finally stopped her steps at the flowerbed.

We didn't talk for a while as we wiped our sweat and waited for our breaths to adjust.

After some difficulty, the first thing that came out Fuyuumi's mouth was this,

"Damnnnnnn ittttttttt! That was so baddddddd! Ai-chan Epic Loss!"

She completely blamed herself.

"I specifically didn't want to do that kind of thing! But I actually betrayed Ishige-senpai whom I like so much!

I'm so stupid! Ai-chan is stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid!"

She crouched down in the flowerbed, and started ripping the weeds that had grown unrestrained during the summer out of the group. She was actually doing a big help for the gardening club.

"Let it pass. It's done already, so there's nothing you can do."

I lightly patted Fuyuumi's arched back,

"Today, Senpai's head was also overflowing with blood, so after a while bring it up with her again, okay?"

"I can't face them ever again."

Fuyuumi shook her head as she crouched.

"All the effort I've spent developing the image of a disciplinary committee member went up in smoke today. I'm completely powerless. No one will listen to me anymore. Even if I step up and remind people, they won't follow the school rules, and the school will grow completely out of control. Everyone's going to butt heads and shout「Yahaa! as they go to school!" [12]

That's way too pessimistic. It looks like her wound really was deep.

"Don't be that dejected. It's not like you."

"B-But..."

Fuyuumi lifted her head, and her eyes were glistening with tears. I was shocked speechless. She really was crying.

"If you knew you were going to regret it so much, why didn't you control yourself?"

"My body moved by itself."

"It can't move by itself, you..."

Fuyuumi sobbed and sniffed, sucking in with her nose.

"Whenever I run into you, Ta-kun, I become really weird. Did you know that?"

"...Yeah."

Should I say I knew it, or because I learned it through experience?

I couldn't think of what else to say, so I sank into silence.

The athletics clubs seemed like they had all finished club activities today, and I didn't hear any more sounds from around us. A school that didn't have any people in it was actually really peaceful.

"Hey, Fuyuumi."

I suddenly thought of something.

"Why do you like me?"

Fuyuumi's red eyes opened wide in a daze.

"Why are you asking that kind of thing?"

"...no, it's nothing. I just suddenly thought of it."

Even if it was a shy and vague dismissal, there actually was a reason.

Because if she liked me to the extent that she could even let her extremely important disciplinary committee duties fall apart—

What kind of reason could there be if she liked me to that extent?

"This well..."

Fuyuumi tilted her head.

"I've never thought about it before."

Her expression was fully serious, and I couldn't see a trace of embarrassment similar to the kind I was trying to hide.

"Because by the time I realized it, I already liked you. I can't remember how it started."

"So it's like that?"

Well, if it was something that happened in kindergarten, it made sense if you couldn't remember.

"But, there has to be some kind of reason, right? If there isn't, there's no way you could like me."

When Fuyuumi heard this, she revealed a rather lonely smile.

"Why does there have to be a reason for me to like you ?"

"..."

This was the strongest, most intense feeling of「 cuteness I've felt towards this girl up until today.

Fuyuumi smiling with tears in the corners of her eyes was seriously too dazzling.

I couldn't help but lower my head.

"I don't understand this kind of thing very well."

"Liking other people, you mean?"

"Perhaps so."

After all, I was anti-love.

Even when I look at perfectly happy sweethearts, I think,「When are they going to break up?

Even when I look at sweethearts who have a great relationship, I think,「They must be lying to each other behind their backs.

I am a twisted person who can only think like that.

"—Well, that being said."

Fuyuumi stood up and gave a big stretch,

"I'm the only one who hasn't demonstrated my「dere for you yet."

"Huh?"

"Did you forget? This was from the「OreDere Beauty Pageant during our club trip. Natsukawa-san, Chiwa, and Himecchi all did it, but I never did because I was disqualified... so, want me to do it for you now?"

"You can't win the prize, and Saeko-san won't see it."

"I don't care."

Fuyuumi smiled and shook her head. Then she used her handkerchief to dab away at her tears.

"I've felt like my mind's been in a huge mess, and I want to get it off my chest."

"...I see."

I was the factor that got Fuyuumi expelled from the disciplinary committee.

As such, I had a duty to receive the feelings that Fuyuumi had right now.

Fuyuumi took a big breath, and as if she assembled all of her power within her body, she shouted,

"Ta-kun, I wub you the most————————!"

How...

How embarrassing!

Why does she always mispronounce「love as wub? But I won't complain about it at this point.

"When I'm in front of you, I get restless. My head gets hot and my chest feels tight. I can barely understand how I feel. I don't understand. I lub you too much! Dammit ♪"

Ai-chan waved her arms in circles as she shouted.

She added love-marks to the end of all of her sentences , and they echoed off of the school walls.[13]

"I tried to protect my decent image. For my father, little brother, and my deceased mother, I needed to pull myself together. I was a first-rate disciplinary committee member, but when Ta-kun was around, I'm no good. I become soft and flimsy. The time when we met during the opening ceremony, I nearly fainted. 「Ah, it's Ta-kun! I nearly shouted and jumped at you. I tried my best to control myself. I worked really, really, really hard to control myself, but Ta-kun didn't notice me. You weren't with me. Rather, you looked happy together with your childhood friend. You weren't with me, but you looked sugar sweet with your girlfriend. I cried in the bathroom! I became muddle-headed, soft and flimsy, but even so, I loved and lubbed you!"

W-Wow—

The weather's really hot.

No, I'm the one who's hot.

Hime's confession was pretty powerful, but Ai-chan's was... this, how do I put it... it really hit the core of my body? Or did it go to my pores? My sweat was already pouring incessantly.

"It's enough if I'm the only one who like's Ta-kun. It's fine if no one else understands Ta-kun's strong points, but if I'm the only one in the universe who understands, that's enough. I'm the only one who lubs you the most—! The end!"

After feeling the ending was a little rude, Ai-chan lowered her head.

And then she refused to raised her head.

"A-Ai-chan?"

"Don't come here!"

She used her hands to prevent me from walking closer as she kept her head lowered.

"I-If you come over right now, A-Ai-chan won't know what to do..."

Her voice was starting to become incomprehensible.

Because she kept her lowered posture, I couldn't see her expression, but I guessed her face must be blushing.

And just then.

—The sound of a thump.

Because of the noise, I naturally turned my head around to look.

Probably because a lazy gardening club member forgot it, but a bamboo broom that had been leaning against the school wall had fallen over.

There was a girl who had been standing next to the bamboo broom for quite a while.

There was one very obvious antenna hair that stuck up from that student.

...As she stared in our direction, her eyes opened wide with an expression as if she were thinking,「Damn!

She was the disciplinary committee president, Ishige Mari-senpai.

"A-A-A-Ahhh—"

When Fuyuumi noticed Senpai's presence, her expression filled with despair and a loss for words.

"W-W-W-Wahh—"

Senpai was equally at a loss for words.

That being said, behind Senpai there were another ten or so disciplinary committee members. All of them had covered their mouths with their hands and were blushing as they stared at us.

Fuyuumi trembled with fear and asked,

"D-Did... Did you hear everything that I just said?"

The disciplinary committee members nodded simultaneously.

And then Ishige-senpai—

"I-I-I-I've never heard such an enthusiastic l-l-l-love confession. It's m-my first time hearing something like that... wump."

The sound of a wump.

Ishige-senpai very attentively added the sound effect herself, and fainted.

The hair antenna wilted just like its master. The little thing was stretching around earlier, so maybe it was some kind of unknown parasite.

"P-Please pull yourself together President!"

"Keep your cool!"

"It's no good, she's suffered acute love poisoning!"

The committee members repeatedly tried to shake their senpai's body, and even went as far as to call it some strange disease.

Fuyuumi on the other hand—

"Damn it I want to die! Ai-chan is going out for a run—!"

"Hey, wait a minute! Don't run away, Ai-chan!"

In other words, don't leave me by myself!

In this kind of situation—even I'm embarrassed to the point I want to die!

♦

Later in the infirmary.

The committee members and I later carried the fainted Ishige-senpai to a bed, and used a wet towel to cool her forehead until she awoke. The nurse took her temperature and pulse, and thankfully there wasn't anything unusual with her body.

Fuyuumi also returned to help out when the nurse left. Looks like even when her embarrassing confession's been heard, she can't leave her senpai aside. She mentioned she wanted Senpai to become her wedding witness, so she probably liked Ishige-senpai a lot.

While Fuyuumi sat on a folding chair, and used a circular fan to fan Senpai—

"Strange... why am I here?"

Senpai sat up on the bed, and the wet towel on her forehead fell down.

"Sorry, Senpai. It's all my fault."

"I also want to apologize to you. I'm so sorry!"

Senpai sluggishly stared at Fuyuumi and I who had our heads lowered.

"...I lost consciousness."

Senpai looked as if she was thinking about something as she stayed silent for a while.

Then, she lifted her head, and stared straight at Fuyuumi.

"Fuyuumi Ai-san, when you said,「Love does not have to have a reason, were you serious?"

Fuyuumi nodded.

"But, Kidou-kun already has a girlfriend. The thing you want to do is basically equivalent of robbing someone of something they cherish. This kind of shameless love is certainly not permitted, but you still plan to press forward?"

Fuyuumi immediately lowered her head.

She tightly clutched her skirt, stared at her knees, and sank into silence. Then—

"I won't let myself turn into a shameless disciple."

"What does that mean?"

"If I get to snatch him straight from Natsukawa Masuzu's hands, I will make Kidou-kun think I'm interesting, and then he'll like me—I will become that kind of incredible maiden for you all to see."

The infirmary fell into absolute silence.

The other disciplinary committee members all held their breath as they watched the situation develop.

Not after long—

"I lose."

Ishige-senpai gave a bitter smile.

She faced the disciplinary committee and asked,

"To all you members who have a responsibility for discipline at our school, even though Fuyuumi-san was distressed by all this shameless love, she still tried her best to maintain her purity and honesty. With her like that, is she qualified to be one of our comrades?"

"Of course, President!"

The voices of the committee members overlapped beautifully.

"After all, the school committee members are all girls, so there are times when they'll fall in love."

"Although improper male and female relationships are a violation of the school rules, I do not consider merely liking someone against the rules."

"Though, Fuyuumi-san, you are a little too excessive."

"When there comes a time when you do too much, it'll be up to us to to stop you!"

Fuyuumi fell dumbstruck upon hearing these words.

"I-Is it really okay? I... can continue to be a disciplinary committee member?"

"Yes, please continue."

Ishige-senpai unhesitantly spoke,

"Your present assignment is to strictly supervise 「Society for Bringing Out Your Maiden Self, and take care of those students who easily deviate from normal practice. Of course, you cannot neglect your responsibilities as a disciplinary committee member. Do you understand?"

"Yes!"

Fuyuumi responded loudly, and then immediately stood up and hugged me.

"Did you hear that Ta-kun!? I-I can continue being a disciplinary committee member! I don't have to resign!"

"Yeah, that's great Ai-chan!"

I was honestly as happy as if it were my own problem.

After all, if she didn't have the disciplinary committee armband, it wouldn't feel quite like Fuyuumi Ai anymore !

"Also, there's one more thing."

Senpai was speaking her mind.

What is it? If she could delineate some borders that Fuyuumi shouldn't overstep, I would be really happy.

"As the disciplinary committee of Hanenoyama High School, we wholly support Fuyuumi Ai's romance!"

.....Huh!?

"Listen everyone! We will overthrow Natsukawa Masuzu, and overthrow Harusaki Chiwa!"

"Understood, President!"

Faced with an identical cry of the committee members, I interrupted, flustered.

"W-Wait a moment! Why do you support it? It's fine if you just implicitly accept it!"

"It'd be boring like that~!"

Ishige-senpai acted like a mischievous little girl and shook her head,

"After hearing Fuyuumi's confession, maybe r-romance is a pretty impressive thing? I think I've changed how I think."

Her cheeks flushed red, which was cute, and her curvy hair antenna was also pretty sexy.

But as far as I'm concerned, there's no hope left for me!

"Uh—so—we'll think about it? If we do things like that , it'll be rather troublesome for me?"

After that, no one paid attention to me. Other committee members agreed and said things like,「I'll also try confessing to him or I think I'll send a text to that guy from middle school. Their lovestruck minds have been awoken.

Then—

"W-Whaa!?"

A pitiful cry came from my mouth.

That was because Fuyuumi, who had been hugging me the entire time, suddenly exerted force with her arms.

She lifted her head from my chest, and revealed a wide smile I had never seen before.

"Hehehehe. Ta-kun, the entire world is a cheerleading team for our love ♪"

"!?"

Lov-

Lovestruck power just leveled up again!

Fuyuumi's eyes looked like they were hazily dreaming as she stared at me.

"Our wedding celebration needs to be held in an extremely big place. Hey, Ta-kun, should we start saving money for it now? Let's buy a brand new piggy bank, and we'll deposit a hundred yen every day."

"...Whatever you want..."

Following Senpai's sentiments, the disciplinary committee really was like a real cheerleading squad. They drummed up enthusiasm and shouted: 「Use our assistance and take a leading role in the mayhem— Yeah —!

Seriously, the uproar was getting worse and worse.

How did the entire school become involved in my mayhem?

【暁の聖竜姫】秋篠姫香

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特技：荒ぶる鷹のﾎﾟｰｽﾞ

♥プロフィール♥
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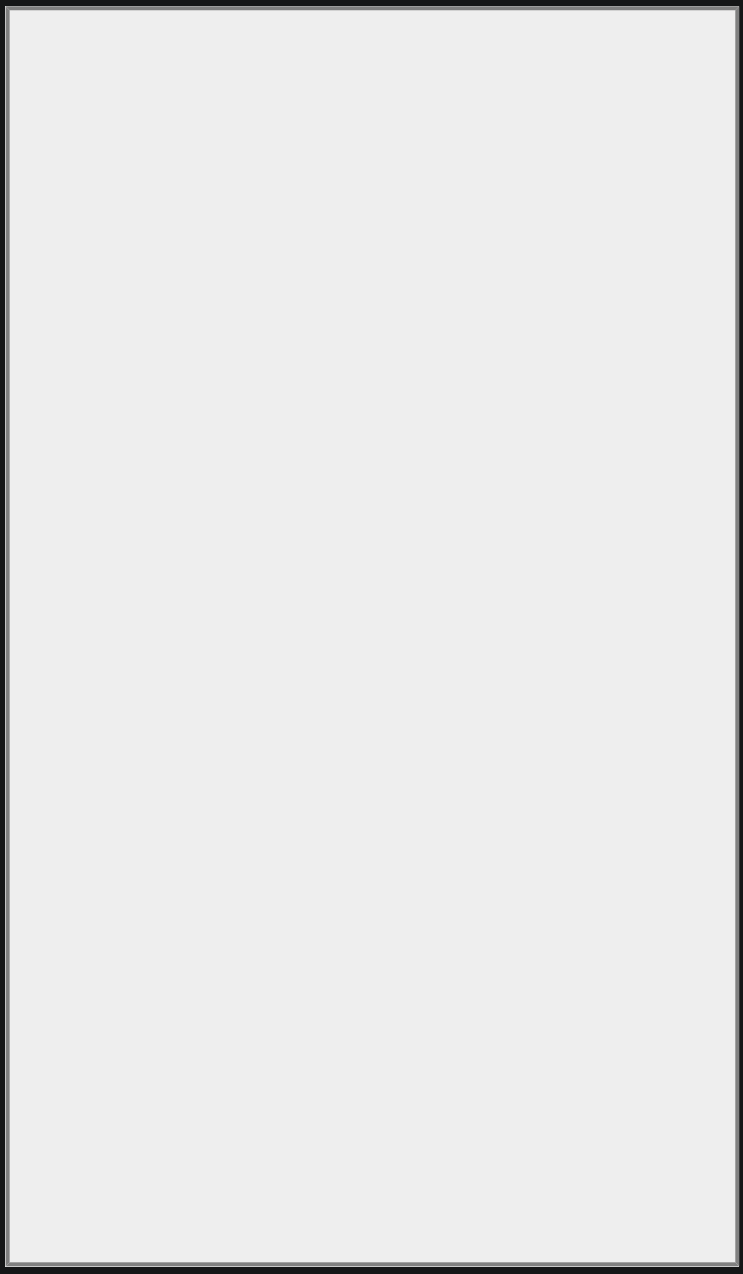
♥親愛度UP♥
「ｷﾞｭｯとして？」

♥親愛度MAX♥
「ｴｲﾀがいれば、他に何もいらない」



#3: Himeka, There is Someone She Likes

Ever since Chiwa stopped coming to eat dinner, the living room's become so lonely.

#3 姫香、好きなひとができました

It was annoying when she was here, yet it was so lonely when she wasn't. It was just like an old-fashioned air conditioner. If you turned it on it was too cold, but when you turned it off it it was too hot.

...Ugh, it's seven o'clock already?

Saeko-san wasn't coming home tonight, so I had no motivation to make dinner for one person.

Just when I decided to go with an egg and instant noodles for dinner, the doorbell rang.

"Is it Chiwa?"

N-no, probably not.

If it were Chiwa, she would have gone straight through the yard and let herself in through the French window. [14]

As I was wondering who it could be at this time of the day—

"Eita, will you hold me?"

She was clutching large Boston bags[15] in each of her armpits.

On her back, she was carrying a swelling backpack.

Akishino Himeka was drenched in sweat and gasping for breath as she stood at my front door.

"Hi Hime. What's going on? You're carrying a ton of luggage."

"I have been forced into exile."

This is still Japan you know, Hime?

"The Primogenitor Gaia has been invaded, so I've become a vagrant 《DRIFTES[16]. The only place I can go to is Eita's."

Even though this was Hime's typical way of saying things, she expressed herself very clearly.

Then I suddenly realized it,

"Did you run away from home?"

Hime vigorously nodded her head.

"In Hyperdimensional terms, it's IED." [17]

"It's IEDE—"

Even if she forgot one letter, the hyperdimensional part was unnecessary. That being said, I haven't heard her say things like hyperdimensional in a while. Was she bored with this setting already?

Hime lowered her head,

"And that's why, sorry to bother." [18]

"Please come in, my humble home is simple and crude—wait a second! You ran away from home!? Did you really run away from home?"

"Affirmative."

Hime looked up to me with firmly angry eyes and spoke.

"My precious treasures have been destroyed. There's no reason for me to go back to that place."

♦

I cooked miso, cabbage, and fried pork soup, and ate it together with Hime.

Even though I cooked the meal from leftover ingredients in the fridge, Hime eagerly finished every last bit. Ah, it really is so much more meaningful to share dinner with others.

"Oh right, what treasures were you talking about?"

I asked Hime this as I refilled her empty cup with warm tea.

"My Genesis Force from「ORIGIN LOW" [19].

In other words, I didn't get it.

"Sorry, can you explain it a little more clearly?"

"The「Holy Scriptures that catalyzed and spun out a good deal of my fantasies."

"T-Try saying it again."

"My precious manga and games were thrown out."

"That's awfully clear all of a sudden!"

This was probably the ultimate reason for an elementary school student to run away from home. But Hime was a high schooler!

"Who threw it away? Your mother? Father?"

"My older sister."

"Oh, you have an older sister? What does she do?"

"She's a third-year in college, majoring in business at a university in Tokyo in order to inherit the Akishino Hotel. She's come home for summer break after being away for a very long time."

That being said, I remembered now that Hime's family ran a hotel business. Kaoru once said that their family managed an ancestral inn ever since the Edo period.

"My sister and I are completely unalike."

When Hime finished her tea, she lowered her head.

"When you say unalike, how so?"

"Everything."

That response didn't help at all.

Did she mean their personalities were different? For example, her sister was very social and her friends were all very extroverted… in other words, riajuus? [20]

At the moment, the phone that I left on the living room sofa rang.

I got off the table and gave it a look—the incoming phone call was from「Akishino Himeka.

"Huh?"

I looked back at the table, but Hime was empty handed and in a daze.

"Where's your phone?"

Hime gave a started expression, and groped around her pockets with several pats.

"I forgot it at home."

No wonder.

In other words, the person who made the phone call must have been one of Hime's family members.

I took a deep breath, and pressed the talk button.

"...Hello?"

A very calm and youthful female voice seemed to come from the other end of the phone—

"Apologies for disturbing you so late in the night. May I ask if this is Burning Fighting Fighter-san's cellphone ?"

"……Yes."

I wanted to lay on the ground and die.

Damn that Hime… Why did she have to register me with that name?! Furthermore, I should have corrected it to Villager A several days ago!"

"Is this very long name your real name?"

"No, you could consider it a nickname. I'm so sorry."

I didn't know why I apologized.

The voice from the other end of the phone seemed unsympathetic.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Akishino Himeka's older sister, Yuuhana. May I ask if my younger sister visited your residence lately?"

I temporarily covered the mouthpiece with my hand.

"It's your sister's phone call."

Hime's face grew pale, and she mimed huge X's in front of her chest.

I nodded slightly and returned to the phone.

"No, she never did."

I heard a slight sigh come from the other end of the phone.

"...Are you Himeka's classmate?"'

Her attitude suddenly turned into「adult speaking to child tone.

"I'm a fellow club member."

"Club? That girl is part of a club? Which club?"

Her voice sounded rather astonished.

Oh dear, how should I respond to this? If it were Masuzu, she'd be able to nonchalantly cook up some kind of nonsense easily.

"What's wrong? Is it one of those inexplicable clubs?"

"Uh, it's called the Society for Bringing Out Your Maiden Self."

"What does that club do?"

"...What does it do?"

Although we've been established for three months already, I still had no clue. Probably no one had any idea.

"I asked you a question?"

"S-Sorry."

Another sigh came from the other end of the phone.

"This is just my guess, but could it be a manga or game-related club?"

"Huh?"

"Because that girl loves those kinds of things the most."

It looks like she made an erroneous interpretation out of my hesitation.

"She's been like this since middle school. She didn't study seriously, and wasted all of her entire allowance on those kinds of stupid trinkets. I thought she would change one day, but after being apart for so long, she hasn't changed at all! She hasn't improved."

I felt a little sorry for Hime after hearing that about her .

"She just has interest in manga. You don't need to be that extreme."

"If it were simply a relaxing hobby of hers, I'd approve. However, that girl is just too addicted. She can't tell the difference between delusion and reality. Even if I tell her that, it's pointless."

"But, she's not making any trouble for anyone."

"That girl has this mistaken belief that she can do anything as long as she isn't making trouble for anyone . If you give up your self-respect and intellect, then chase after these meaningless imaginary worlds, what kind of person will you be in the end? In the eyes of society and others, aren't you just a worthlessly manufactured human being?"

It seemed like she was getting angrier and angrier.

"Your opinion is too subjective. There are also people who are positively influenced by manga, right? Why do you only stress the bad part? It's not fair."

"What is this positive influence that you speak of?"

"Um, that…"

I shot a glance at Hime, who was very anxiously staring at me.

"It can help you make friends."

"Friends?"

"Yes. Hime… Himeka-san and I have similar interests in anime and manga. That's why we became friends. Our club members are the same. Isn't that a good thing?"

I wasn't lying.

Hime currently cherishes her Chuunibyou delusions dearly. Her fantasies are very similar to the kind I had in middle school. This was probably because we were fascinated by the same works. Because of this, she identified me as her「Past-Life Lover and joined Jien-Otsu.

"Hm…"

Hime's older sister quietly seemed to be thinking about something.

It didn't look like she quite agreed with me, and it seemed like she was considering how to attack from a different direction—that was what her silence felt like.

"Among Himeka's text messages, you are the most common recipient. That girl never had friends in middle school. It looks like that's not the case anymore in high school."

"Yes, you could say so."

"Could you be dating Himeka?"

"No, definitely not."

Although I was curious about how she would react if I said that she was my ex-girlfriend, I didn't test it. That being said, Hime gave a「What's going on? So harsh… expression as she looked at me. I don't think she knew what we were talking about, right?

"Anyhow, has anything happened to Himeka-san?"

"We had a little fight earlier on. Honestly, that girl… After she changed her clothes, she even took her textbooks and ran out the door."

"I see…"

"I don't think that girl has the means to run away from home, but that's probably what happened… I know I asked this already, but is Himeka really not at your place?"

At this point, Hime's sister's voice became restless for the first time.

I though I was stabbed by sinful feelings and intentions, Hime beside me was similarly uneasy. I was simply incapable of telling the truth in front of her.

"She's not here… but I'll also go look for any clues about her whereabouts. If I find anything, I'll get her to contact you."

"**Thank you very much.**"

The phone call ended there.

"Sigh…"

I gave a big sigh and sank into the sofa. I felt extremely exhausted. Debating with an older person really sucked the energy out of me.

"Eita, thank you."

Hime hugged my arm, and peered into my face.

"Is my sister angry?"

"She's angry… but she's also extremely worried. She's very worried about you."

But then Hime intensely shook her head.

"She's not worried about me. Rather, she's worried about ruining the「Akishino family name. In my sister's head, only the hotel is important."

"I had a different impression."

"I disagree. To my sister, I'm just an inconvenience. That's why I left."

She stubbornly refused to listen to me.

Although her sister's words were very one-sided, Hime actually wasn't that different.

In other words, they put labels on each other and faulted each other based on those points. Regardless, if this continued, there wouldn't be any resolution.

Anyways, since I promised Hime's sister, I really should go look for "clues" of Hime's whereabouts.

I called Chiwa and asked her to come over, and then explained the situation to the two of them.

"Wow—that's one scary sister."

Chiwa had come over wearing her pajamas. I felt she was extremely blunt.

"Since that's the case, Himecchi, you can stay over at my place tonight. My mom can call your sister, and that way there'll be no problems, right?"

However, Hime shook her head.

"I want to sleep over at Eita's house. Is that not alright?"

"No way!"

Chiwa's expression suddenly became very frightening.

Hime seemed to deflate as she hung her head.

"Why? We spent the night together during our club trip."

"This and that are totally different! How can a boy and a girl sleep alone under the same roof? Definitely not okay!"

"Then… how about Chihuahua stay over also?"

Hime lightly tugged on Chiwa's sleeves.

"T-That's also no good! No good! No good!"

Chiwa objected extremely intensely, as if she were trying to convince herself.

"Hey, Chiwa. There's something I want to ask you."

"Even if Ei-kun asks me it's not okay! Even if there's three of us or whatever, although I'm not Ai, it's simply too shameless!"

"Not that, something else. What do you think of manga and games?"

"Ero ones are bad!"

"Can we get away from that topic?! ...I had a lot of manga when I was in middle school right? How did you feel when you looked at me then?"

"I figured you must have liked it a lot."

"That's all?"

"What else am I supposed to think?"

Chiwa stared blankly. Like always, this girl thought really simply.

If Hime's sister thought that simply, it'd be great. But as soon as she starts to think about positive or negative influences, she'll get stuck and be unable to free herself.

"Hey Ei-kun, when you graduated from middle school, didn't you sell practically all of your manga?"

When Hime heard this, her eyes went wide.

"Sold them? Why?"

"Well if you ask me why…"

If Chiwa had asked me, I would have responded, 「I don't like them anymore. But to be honest, that wasn't actually the case. I could say I wanted to wave farewell to my chuunibyou self, so I abandoned the things I used to love to become a new person blah blah—and then all of these kinds of troublesome reasons would start flooding out one after another.

In short, I shouldn't say contradictory things about the issue with Hime's sister.

"I would never throw away the books I love the most. That's why I can't forgive my sister for throwing away things so lightly."

"...I see."

I could only nod my head.

Anyhow, it looked like the root to this argument between sisters was very deep.

Afterwards, Chiwa went home and asked her mother to contact Hime's sister, who barely agreed to let Hime stay the night at the Harsuaki's. Normally in these kinds of situations, one would speak with the parents, but it looked like they were busy working in the hotel.

Perhaps the reason why Hime's sister was so strict was because she was trying her best to fill the gap left by her parents.

If that was the case, I still thought she could try to understand her little sister a little better.

Then the next day came.

By the time my morning studying pace wore off, it was about time for lunch—but then the doorbell rang.

I opened the door, and a ghastly pale Hime jumped inside.

"Eita, it's bad!"

"What's wrong?!"

Did her older sister charge in or something?

"There's a new inscribed legend that the world will create crystal tears today."

"...Sorry, can you say that a little more clearly?"

"A hidden tome descended onto this world in an instant—today."

"Say that again~"

"Today is the release date of my favorite manga, so I want to go buy it."

This is your second consecutive day coming to my place. Learn to be better behaved, Hime!

"The closest bookstore to here is the WING bookstore. I'll draw a map for you right now."

I was about to retreat back into my house, but Hime grabbed the hem of my shirt.

"Come with me, Eita?"

"No, I want to study."

"...Together?"

Faced with her teary puppy eyes staring up at me, I was unable to refuse her. I'd definitely listen to her. That being said, was that gaze a superpower?

"Then, let's go out for lunch while we're at it."

"The special edition bookstore is in front of the train station, so I want to go there."

There were a lot of cheap restaurants near the train station, so it was perfectly convenient.

I tidied my clothes up simply, and then left the house with Hime.

It was only ten minutes by bus to the train station, but we went by Hime's request and walked on foot.「I want to walk together with Eita, is that okay? Again, I was utterly defeated by her endearingness. I'm so popular it's laughable.

I pretended to ignore the gazes around us and said,

"So, what's the name of that manga called?"

"ARCANA DRAGONS (Holy Spirit Dragons)."

"Holy Dragon?"

ARCANA DRAGONS (「Holy Dragon for short) was an alternate-universe fantasy battle manga serialized in a certain well-known weekly shounen magazine. The work is targeted at otakus, which was definitely very rare for weekly magazines. There's a ridiculous amount of bishoujo and bishounen characters. With the rich setting and abundant characters, fans have enthusiastically made many doujins. I was really into these kinds of works when I was in middle school.

I'm not going to hide anything, but the「Holy Dragon Knight of Dawn (Burning Fighting Fighter) setting is totally plagiarized from Holy Dragon... no, I should say it was a key factor that enlightened and inspired me.

Was Hime also a「Holy Dragon fan? No wonder the compatibility score of our delusions was so high.

"What volume is coming out today?"

"The twelfth volume is coming out."

"How far have they gotten? Are they still fighting the Wyvern Army?"

"I only read the tankōbon[21], so I don't know. But that arc is probably going to finish in this volume."

Hime then looked at me with eyes in disbelief,

"You're not reading「Holy Dragon, Eita?"

"I was still following it last year, but now I'm not anymore."

Hime suddenly revealed a hurt expression.

"Why…? Is it not interesting anymore?"

"Well, it's not because of that. For some reason, I just don't feel like reading it anymore."

Ever since my parents vanished, I've gradually lost interest in the manga and anime world.

Because I realized that no matter how much I talk about these imaginary things, there's no way to prevail over the harshness of reality.

The only way to defeat reality is through reality itself.

And in my situation, only cultivating academic achievements could pave my way into medical school.

That was the only way I could overcome my unfavorable circumstances.

When I told Hime's sister, 「Don't look down on manga , I actually thought that way myself—to be honest, I really was hypocritical.

"I hope you'll also read it, Eita."

Hime spoke as she tightly held onto my right hand.

"Because they've reached an extremely climatic point right now. I hope you'll take a look, because it's definitely interesting."

"Mhn…"

I didn't know how to respond and inadvertently my gaze drifted away—but then I saw a figure turning the corner at the crossroads in front of us.

It was moving figure pulling a red bicycle. This felt strangely familiar.

"Eh?!"

"Eh?!"

The simultaneous exclamations we gave were identical .

"It's you again…"

"That's what I wanted to say, you disgusting otaku."

Natsukawa Mana.

She was an arrogant middle school girl with two fluttering silver pigtails. She was also Masuzu's little sister.

"Are you practicing riding a bike again? If that's the case, let me teach you."

"I don't need you to meddle in my business! I ride it perfectly fine now! I just happened to be tired right now, so I'm walking along with it."

I took a glance below the hem of her red dress, and saw that her knees were plastered with a bunch of bandaids. If I pointed that out, she'd be furious, so it'd be better to leave it unsaid.

Hime immediately hid behind my back.

"Huh? Aren't you the poet from that time?"

"..."

Hime didn't respond, and wrapped her arms around me like a Konakijii[22].

"Come on, I already apologized about that stuff with the club, right?"

A while ago, Mana crashed our club meeting and ripped apart the poem Hime wrote. This was what she was referring to.

"I don't mind that anymore."

"Then you can say something then."

"...Nice to meet you."

"Now you say it?!"

Huh—

I feel like I haven't seen Hime this afraid in a while.

It looks like she's able to talk normally with us, but still has difficulties talking with others.

Just then I had a flash of intuition.

"Hey, Mana; are you free in a little while?"

"Rather than saying I'm free… it's more like I don't have plans."

In other words, she was free. She really wasn't honest at all.

"Then will you eat lunch with us? There's something I want to talk to you about."

Mana gave a glance at Hime and then spoke.

"If that poet's okay with it, then I don't really care."

"Eita…?"

Hime perplexedly tilted her head.

"Hime, I want to get ideas from this girl for a strategy to deal with your sister."

"What do you mean?"

"Because this girl hates otakus. If we ask her why she hates them, maybe we'll find a way to persuade your sister."

"...I understand."

Okay, so it's decided then.

I brought the two of them to a fast-food shop in front of the train station.

Because it was still rather early for lunch, the store was empty. There was just a group of middle school students working on their vacation homework sitting in the no-smoking area.

I grabbed a piece of french fry and started to depict for Mana the current situation—

"That's all that sister's fault!"

She squished the paper cup with her drink as she forcefully advocated her stance.

"T-That's unexpected…"

"Huh? Why?"

"I thought you would say something like,「Manga? Disgusting! It's convenient that it got thrown away!"

Mana snorted with her nose.

"Yeah right, collecting manga is disgusting, no doubt about that. The magazines that they sell at convenience stores are okay, but manga? It's hard to believe there's people who collect that. I don't understand it."

"Tankōbon are also no good…?"

Isn't this girl's criteria for an otaku too harsh? Like this, even Chiwa who collects manga nonstop would be considered an otaku.

"However, that doesn't mean that sister has the right to just randomly throw her little sister's stuff away. Those are two totally different things! The older sister can't force the little sister to accept her own opinions! So a person like this sister really is…"

"O-okay, I get it. You can calm down now since I get it! "

I hurriedly tried to stop Mana as she started to lean forward across the table.

"I think you're right."

Hime, who had been sitting silently on the side, suddenly spoke.

"My sister always thinks she's better and smarter, and frequently looks down on me. She always treats me like a child. You can't do this, you can't do that; go do this, go do that. She always bosses others around. Furthermore, people always compare us. When we meet new people,

they always say,「The older sister must have a very outstanding little sister. I'm just me. I was simply born a few years later, so I don't understand why I have to suffer this kind of treatment."

Mana was struck speechless when confronted with a Hime who suddenly became eloquent with words.

"T-That's right! Where'd that come from? I never expected you'd be such a talkative person!"

"I'm not just any person. My name is Hime."

"OK Hime! You can also call me Mana!

The two of them clasped each other's french-fry-grease covered hands together. It looked like the two of them reached a connection I simply didn't understand.

Woahhhh.

Don't tell me all little sisters have a lot of pressure?

"Well, Mana, let me ask you again. How do you think we should get Hime's sister to recognize her interests."

Mana sucked in a mouthful of Oolong tea through a straw with a hiss.

"The reason why I think「otaku are disgusting! is because I don't understand how they can be so obsessed with certain things.

"Ah—I see."

I could understand this kind of sentiment.

"So then, the easiest way to do this is to make Hime's sister understand the charms of manga that Hime loves."

Hime voiced nods in agreement and wore a very serious expression.

"I think so too, but the hard part is doing that."

"That's true. But how about you go to the bookstore together? See, aren't there specialty otaku stores around here?"

"Yeah, we're planning on going there after a bit."

Suddenly, Hime's face lit up and she grabbed Mana's hand,

"Mana, come with us?"

"T-To which bookstore? Why do I need to go to that kind of otaku nest—"

"I want to treat it as a test-run for when I bring my older sister. Let's go? Let's go?"

The puppy-dog eyes that I suffered from earlier were now taking a beautiful hit on Mana.

Looks like it was also super effective on female middle school students.

"F-Fine… I have time anyways."

Like that, she succeeded after much resistance to make Mana nod her head.

Former Otaku, me.

Current Otaku, Hime.

Not-Otaku, Mana.

Although we were a totally mismatched party, I still looked forward to it with a little excitement.

I then remembered that I never had any otaku friends in middle school, so I always sneakily entered bookstores on my own.

This was the first time I had anyone come with me.

♦

The name of that bookstore was「Manga Kingdom

For short,「MangaDom.

It was a four-story building five minutes away by foot from the train station, rather distant from the downtown district. This is just trivia, but it's the largest bookstore related to manga in the entire city of Hanenoyama. Even though it was a weekday, there were still many customers.

As we stepped into the shop, we were greeted by a gush of cold air. I then realized there were many other students like us who were shopping. It felt more crowded than usual, maybe because it was the premier release date of「Holy Dragon.

"Alright Hime, where do you want to start?"

"Of course we need to start from the top floor."

Just after she said it, Hime started to climb up the stairs right next to the shop entrance.

Mana hurriedly interrupted,

"Wait, why don't we take the elevator? Are you going on a diet?"

"The elevator's really slow and crowded."

Like Hime said, not only was the elevator for this store slow, but it was also used by store employees to transport merchandise. That's why it was pretty much useless unless it was before noon or almost time to close the shop.

"It's okay. I'm not very athletic, so let's go up slowly."

"Aahhh, that's fine by me… I'm rather athletic you see? I'm on the track relay team for my school!"

A competitive fire seemed to be lit inside Mana, and she strenuously started to climb the stairs after Hime. I followed behind them.

In between the second and third floors, Mana was already gasping for breath.

"Hey, Hime, which floor is the book you want to buy on?"

"Manga's sold on the first floor."

"First floor? Give me a second… What did you say?! Then why do we have to climb stairs?!"

This was a perfectly reasonable question, but...

"When you come to MangaDom, the first thing you have to do is climb up to the top floor no matter what. Then, while looking for new merchandise, you descend

floors one by one. That's just the basics. For store regulars , they call this way of exploring the store「Climbing the Mountain."

—Thus spoke Master Hime.

There's no need to have a reason to climb mountains, because there's mountains everywhere. That's all.

"The hell to otaku mountains! I don't care!"

Mana said this as she panted for breath and continued climbing behind Hime. Even though this girl never stopped complaining, she really did follow through until the end.

Although we were the only ones climbing up the stairs , we brushed by several customers who were coming down. Everyone gave surprised expressions as they saw Hime and Mana, thinking it was pretty interesting. This was because Hime was a pure black-haired pale-skinned beauty, while Mana was blond-haired and blue-eyed. They were basically synonyms for exotic beauties.

...But, when they saw my face, their faces would distort as if to say,「Weird?. Please don't do that. In these situations, I can't keep my composure. I'm going to cry, okay?

After a bunch of experiences like these, we finally reached the peak.

The fourth floor was all sorts of anime merchandise marketed towards males.

As for merchandise marketed towards males, to put it bluntly, it's moe.

At one glance, you can see that it's prints of anime characters on flashcards, piggy banks, posters, stationery, and so forth, all stuffed throughout the store. It's a place that makes my eyes sparkle whenever I come.

I originally thought Mana would holler,「disgusting disgusting disgusting go die go die go die go die! and start throwing a fit. I never thought—

"Hmph—? It's actually rather like a shrine festival."

Unexpectedly, she actually appeared to like it.

"How is it like a festival?"

"It's like the atmosphere of the mask-selling stand or the cotton candy stall."

"Really?"

I see, now that she mentioned it, I think I felt the same way…?

"Maybe I can use mask-selling stand and cotton candy stall as ways to talk over my sister."

Hime nodded as she jotted down notes.

For sure, Hime and I didn't have that kind of point of view. From an otaku's perspective, it simply just looks like 「otaku merchandise.

"Hey, what's the meaning of this bathroom poster?"

Mana pointed at a custom-made poster of a bishoujo in a rather lewd position.

"Bathroom posters… are bathroom posters."

That's all I could say.

"Huh why? Otakus put up posters in their bathrooms? Why?"

"How would I know why?!"

If I said it, she'd definitely jump to conclusion that otaku are disgusting.

We brought the awestruck-expressioned Mana along and moved to the third floor.

This floor was mostly doujinshi[23] works. They weren't split between male and female-oriented. The displayed works were all ages and sorted by their series … I think. In principle, it was that way.

"I feel like these are kinda different from conventional books?"

Mana picked up a doujin with a beautiful bishounen on the cover and tilted her head in incomprehension.

"This book is so thin it's crazy, and the printing feels different. I've never seen a book like this at a bookstore before."

Hime picked up the same book and said,

"This is a doujinshi. In other words, a fan-created work."

"Fan-created work?"

"Basically, when a fan really likes manga or anime content, and makes a publication themselves."

"An amateur drew this?"

"Sometimes a real professional artist will draw one, and there are even some doujinshi artists that are even better than pros."

"Wow…"

How much of Hime's explanation did Mana understand? She gazed attentively at the cover and nodded her head repeatedly.

"I'm gonna buy this."

"Huh?!"

I cried out unintentionally and the girls around me stared.

I lowered my voice and spoke.

"Are you serious? Do you even know the original anime this comes from?"

"Huh—? I don't know, but this art is seriously beautiful, right? I rarely come here, so it'd be stupid if I left without anything."

"But…"

I really thought it was better if she didn't.

Because the name of that doujinshi was「Pant Heavily From My Holy Sword!...

I was sweating from head to toe, but Hime's eyes sparkled and ignored me.

"I also have books from this circle. Mana has good taste."

"Right? Right? Wanna compliment me more?"

They looked so happy, I didn't say anything more.

We waited for Mana to pay at the register, and then we descended to the second floor.

There were light novels, anime magazines, guidebooks and so forth on this floor.

"Why is this manga bunko-sized[24]? Aren't they normally much bigger?

"That's not a manga. It's a light novel."

"Light novel?"

"Light novel, like—a novel that's pretty easy to read and full of illustrations."

"Ugh… how boring."

"I'm telling you…"

This girl rejected it with her first impression. She'll definitely be hated at school. Why don't I write a light novel about「My Girlfriend's Little Sister has Too Few Friends too?

"But, this is so thick."

Mana picked up a extremely thick book.

She casually flipped through it and spoke.

"Oh, but because there's a lot more single lines and white-space, it feels quite different from your conventional novel."

Hime suddenly poked her head in from beside us a spoke,

"With light novels, there's practically everything. There's thin ones and thick ones; boring ones and fascinating ones; children's ones and adult ones. Everything's welcome, so that's what's beautiful about it.

"Hmph—it's like a toy chest."

"Toy chest…!"

Hime seemed to be inspired again, and she started to scrawl notes.

I thought it would be like this from the start. It looks like Mana's opinions really were helpful for Hime.

In the end, we went down to the first floor and went to buy Hime's limited edition「Holy Dragon.

Other guests who similarly came to get「Holy Dragon were lined up in a long snaking queue.

When I saw Hime's expression when she noticed the mountain of limited edition prints piled in front of the cash register—I wanted to take my phone out and take a picture (but the store forbade photographs, so I could only give up).

Her eyes were sparkling like stars in the night sky and overjoyed when she finally received it.

As she lined up to pay, she very happily stared at the cover.

The time we spent waiting for her wasn't painful at all.

"Now that I think about it..."

Since that summer of eighth grade, it's been a full year since I've come here. This place really hasn't changed at all.

I felt a little happy.

I had already washed my hands of my otaku days, but seeing my「Old Hideout as lively as always, it really made me happy.

If I came by myself, there's no way I'd have this kind of feeling.

This place was overflowing with painful memories from my chuunibyou days. If I had come alone, perhaps it'd hurt so much I'd roll around the floor.

Since I came here together with Hime and Mana, I felt like I've become really refreshed—

"Thanks."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

Mana, who was currently flipping through a shoujo manga magazine tilted her head.

Just then, Hime finished paying and came back.

"No, it's nothing."

With Hime wearing a beaming smile and Mana carrying a serious face, we left the bookstore together—and then.

"So you were here."

The bag that contained「Holy Dragon slid from Hime's hands.

A women got out of a white van at the side of the road, staring at Hime.

She was wearing a neatly tidied navy blue suit and her black hair was coiled up behind her. She was not only a bishoujo, but a very capable bishoujo. Although she was wearing an outfit like a college student doing job interviews, her aura was brimming with style of a seasoned elite woman.

"Sister…"

Without even hearing Hime's stunned murmur, I knew right away that this was Hime's sister, Yuuhana. Her hair sheened like black pearls. The two siblings were exactly the same. It was such a rare sight to see two girls with such beautiful hair in the same place.

…Hey, that van clearly has the words「Akishino Hotel written on it.

"You wrote today was the「Premier Sale, so I figured you definitely would be here. It had clearly something to do with manga."

I never expected she'd be able to find us in this kind of place.

But, it was entirely Hime's fault for forgetting to bring her cellphone that could give anyone her personal information…

"You looked at my calendar?"

Hime's knees were trembling nonstop.

Her eyes were teary and her expression was a mixture of fear and anger.

"Well of course. You were the one who ran away from home."

"Even so, how could you look just like that…"

"Before you have a right to defend your privacy, you'll need to be able to aptly take responsibility of yourself."

With a cold expression, she spoke cold words.

Even if she was beautiful, she was unapproachable.

An blizzard-like icy aura permeated everywhere. The customers who walked out of「MangaDom also seemed curious and gave a glance, but they immediately averted their eyes and hurried away.

"Himeka, why didn't you go to your uncle's place? You know that as a woman of the Akishino family, every girl must undergo training to refine decorum and etiquette."

"I don't want to do that."

Hime said softly but clearly.

"Save those words for after you grow up. When that time comes, you can do whatever you want. But since mom and dad raised us, we have a duty as children of the Akishino house to learn how to work in a hotel. It's a

tradition that you must respect. Your grandmother, mother, and I were all raised this way. Why are you the only one who wants to be lazy?"

"I'm not being lazy."

"You are being lazy. All you do during vacation is read manga. It's pointless."

"It's not pointless!"

Uh...

They were never going to reconcile like this.

I also understand Hime's discomfort. To be forced to do work at home because it was a rule, added together with getting your "pointless" favorite manga thrown out; of course she'd be angry.

On the other hand, did I think Yuuhana-san was wrong? —No, I didn't think so.

It was very fair to say you should listen to your parents while they're raising you in their house.

However, this had nothing to do with whether or not manga was pointless.

Regardless, right now wasn't the atmosphere to「try to get her to understand Hime. With as obstinate as Yuuhana-san was, she'd have no impression at all even if we brought her to MangaDom.

But—

"Hold on for a minute, ma'am!"

The person who walked up with a fearless smile was Natsukawa Mana.

She crossed her arms and relaxed her shoulders, and spoke in her usual rude manner,

"I was listening to you earlier, and what were you blabbing about? This crap about obligations and tradition ? It's not fashionable at all nowadays. You're way old-fashioned, aren't you?"

"Your words have no manners at all."

Yuuhana-san was completely unmoved, and she coldly commented.

"I don't know who you are, but this isn't how you're supposed to treat your elders. It makes me question your parents who raised you."

"Hmph, you dare?"

Mana's fearless smile never crumbled.

Even though her opponent was a college student, she had so much confidence. I guess that means she was sure she could win?

"Although I have no clue about your family situation, but can you really force that girl to do the things she says she hates?"

"Weren't you listening to me? Since she was nurtured and cared for by her parents, she's obligated to listen to her parents. That's all."

"…Uuuuhhhh."

"Huh?"

Huuuuh?

W-Wait a minute.

You were defeated already?! Natsukawa Mana-chan?

"Hey, no matter what you say, it's going to be like this?
"

I whispered quietly to her, but Mana replied with embarrassment,"I-I know!"

She picked up the「Holy Dragon that Hime had dropped, and spoke.

"You said that manga was pointless earlier, right? How can you make such black-and-white judgements without even looking at it yourself!?"

"Huh?"

What was with this girl? All of a sudden, she's arguing on behalf of manga? Wasn't she saying disgusting disgusting digesting nonstop until now?

…No, you could take it that way superficially. Actually, she just wanted to protect Hime.

She really was a good person, generally speaking.

"Here! Look at this! This is a doujinshi that Hime recommended to me—!"

Mana took out the doujinshi she purchased earlier and pointed the cover towards Yuuhana-san. Although I reacted a little strangely, I decided not to speak out.

"Isn't this cover pretty? If an amateur can draw this well, it's pretty amazing, isn't it? Look, this rose and lock is really lifelike, right? Can you draw something like this ? I definitely can't. If other people can do things you can't , I don't think it's strange at all to think it's amazing or admirable."

The words that Mana spoke were a very unconventional but honest response.

"…Can you lend it to me?"

"Please take it."

Mana passed over the doujinshi as per Yuuhana-san's request.

Wait, this is bad! Before I had a chance to stop her, Yuuhana-san started to flip through the pages of「Pant Heavily From My Holy Sword!.

Her beautifully shaped eyebrows twitched.

"I see. I definitely can't. There's no way I can draw something like this."

"Right?"

Yuuhana opened the book and showed the pages to the happily smiling Mana.

On that page there was… uhhh, completely nude men touching each other, using sturdy holy swords to shtick each other back and forth… um, that… it made you wonder how it didn't get an 18+ rating sticker— [25]

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

A shriek that didn't match a blond-hair-blue-eyed beauty came from Mana's mouth.

"W-W-W-W-W-W-W-What's this?! Why is it male on male? Hey, wait a second! Wha? W-What?!"

Mana's entire face was red and her mouth was wide open. I had no clue what I should say to her.

"H-Hyi-Hyaiaaa! It can't b-b-be! Aggghghhhhhhh! Why is it going in that direction? Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Yuuhana stared at the shouting eighth grade girl, and gave a deep sigh.

"I assumed this girl was Himeka's friend, but I never expected her to be such a sorry girl."

Just then.

Hime, who had her head lowered the entire time, suddenly raised her head.

"Mana isn't bad."

She extended her hands as if to protect her pale-faced and dumbstruck friend.

"What isn't bad? How isn't she bad? Can you give some evidence and explain?"

"She wanted to protect me, so she isn't bad!"

Tears came out of Hime's eyes, and she stared at her sister who was taller than her by a head.

"Nothing good will come out of it if you hang around a friend who's such a bad influence."

"If you look down on me, I don't care. I know that I powerlessly ran away from home and depended on other's strength; I know I used the allowance I got from home to buy manga and it's hypocritical. B-But…"

Hime shouted as loudly as she could,

"Don't you dare look down on my treasured friends!"

Yuuhana-san's expression wavered for the first time.

She probably realized she must have said too much, based on Hime's expression.

At this point, I couldn't stay quiet any longer, so I spoke up.

"Hey, can I say something?"

"Huh? Who are you?"

"Eh?"

I-I was here the entire time—

Did she not even notice my presence?

"…I'm Kidou Eita."

"Oh, you're the boy I spoke to on the phone yesterday. What is it?"

I roused myself up, and spoke.

"I used to like manga in the past, and I had delusions just like Himeka-san. Now, however, I'm not interested in it anymore. I even sold my books to the used bookstore."

"Really? So you fixed yourself for the better?"

"Definitely not."

I resolutely shook my head.

"Although I definitely think my past self was really stupid, I never even considered abandoning it. That's because that was one of my former selves, and because of it I'm able to be who I am right now. That's how I feel. No matter what, it's still me."

There will be a day that Hime wakes up from her delusions, and that day grows closer.

That's because eventually there's that inevitable day that you have to face reality.

When the day comes, when you reject that past in order to calmly accept it, yet still be able to step forward, you need to have a stronger heart than everyone else.

"Because in my opinion, you need to be able to accept your embarrassing past selves in order to truly grow up."

Yeah! I think I said it myself beautifully!

—That's what I thought.

On the other side of hot steam that rose from the asphalt road, there was the faint silhouette of a certain girl standing on the sidewalk.

That girl was smiling.

How long had she been standing there? On this blistering hot summer day, she didn't even have a drop of sweat. Her silver hair fluttered like a tree in the breeze.

That girl had a notebook in her hands.

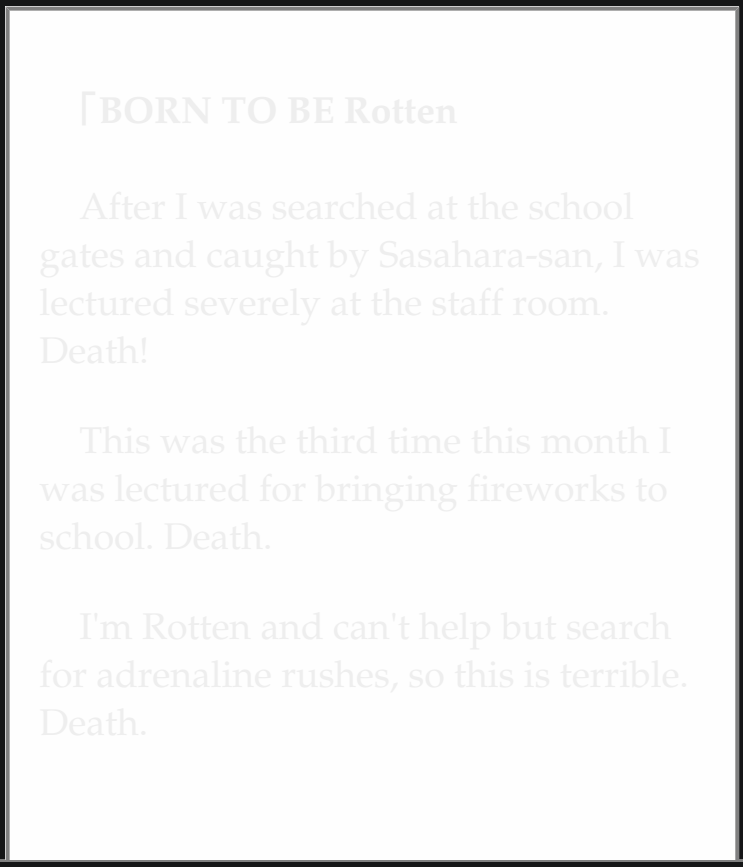
She slowly began to open the pages.

I finally realized what she was about to do,

"Hey! What are you doing————————!?"

Basically about to vomit blood from my shout, I started charging towards that girl!

In that split second when I was just barely, just a finger-length away from touching that noteboooooooooooook!



「BORN TO BE Rotten

After I was searched at the school gates and caught by Sasahara-san, I was lectured severely at the staff room. Death!

This was the third time this month I was lectured for bringing fireworks to school. Death.

I'm Rotten and can't help but search for adrenaline rushes, so this is terrible. Death.

Can no one else understand me? (Death…)

It hurts like shit. And I'm even fighting on behalf of everyone else. It really is death.

Even so, today I'm going to kill 《! [26]

After all, I'm the only one can withstand the terrorist「Prophet (Michael).

If I temporarily hide it my socks tomorrow, what will you do?

To this perpetual never-ending battle between light and darkness—let's drink a toast (PROSIT)!

Death!

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo! I can't bear it! It's impossibbbleeeeeeeeeee!"

I rolled all over the ground despite the scorching hot asphalt. The girl who had been reading aloud from the notebook—Natsukawa Masuzu walked closer with a wide smile stretched across her face.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sister of Akishino-san. My name is Natsukawa Masuzu, the current president of the club,「Society for Bringing Out Your Maiden Self, that your sister is affiliated with."

The sudden developments left Yuuhana-san with wide eyes, but she collected herself.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too. Thank you for taking care of Himeka during club activities."

"No, we should be the ones thanking Himeka for her help."

"Himeka?"

Masuzu gently hugged Hime's shoulder from behind her, even though Hime had been in a daze the whole time.

"If it weren't for Himeka-san, our club never would have been established. Even if she's an otaku or full of delusions, Akishino Himeka, along with everyone else, is an absolutely indispensable member of our club."

"...I see."

Yuuhana-san nodded her head slightly.

"I take back all the bad things I said about you all. It looks like Himeka actually has many good friends in high school."

"Of course."

Yuuhana-san, you actually understood what Masuzu was saying?

That wasn't much different from what I said earlier—

But Masuzu, Hime, and Yuuhana-san weren't paying attention to me at all.

"Himeka, the games and manga that I said I threw away—they're actually in the warehouse."

"...Really?"

"I gave the keys to mom. As for working for the hotel, we can slowly discuss that again later."

Hime nodded her head.

Yuuhana-san sat down in the driver's seat of the van.

After rolling open the window, she handed Hime a handbag.

"This is a change of clothes for today. You only brought one pair with you, right?"

"...Thanks."

Hime expressed her gratitude quietly.

"I'll be taking the last train to Tokyo tonight, so why don't you go back home tomorrow, Hime? Don't make mom and dad too worried."

The van slowly drove away and disappeared on the other side of the intersection.

...so basically it was resolved?

"Hey, why are you here?"

When I said that, Masuzu glared at me with a frightening expression.

"You never got in touch with me, so I came to look for you."

"Huh?"

"Summer vacation's almost over, and you actually ignored your girlfriend and went on a date with your ex-girlfriend—I'll definitely force you to make up for it one of these days."

She dropped her frightening words and left soon afterwards.

While she was leaving, she didn't forget to flick Mana's forehead who was sitting blank-faced on the ground with her finger.

"You're still the same as always, you headstrong girl."

In the end, my「girlfriend stole all the credit.

Despite this, my ex-girlfriend walked to the side of dumbstruck Mana after she was flicked on the forehead.

"Mana, thank you."

She hugged Mana tightly.

—Well

Since Hime made a new friend, a summer vacation day like this wasn't quite so bad.

♦

Eight o'clock at night.

After I cleaned up from dinner and started the washing machine, I was reciting the era dates from Japanese history when the doorbell rang.

This was the second time today that Hime paid a visit. Wasn't she staying over at the Harusaki's house?

"Eita, look at this!"

Panting for breath, Hime passed me a picture book.

It was filthy everywhere. The front cover was scratched and back corner had traces of being folded—it was clear that this picture book was years old.

The title of it was—

"Alice in Wonderland, huh?"

Only from being read aloud—this book was the second most famous book in the world after the Holy Bible.

The story describes a young girl named Alice who chased a rabbit down a hole and entered an unfathomable world. If I thought about it carefully, you could consider it the father of all「Alternate Universe Stories.

"This picture book was the first book I was ever fascinated with. When I was in kindergarten, my sister read it over and over for me many times because my mom and dad were always busy with hotel work. That's why my sister always read stories to me."

Hime hugged the picture book tightly to her chest and spoke with teary eyes.

"I totally forgot. I forgot the reason why I started liking manga and anime. I actually forgot that my sister is the entire reason why I'm who I am right now."

Transparent teardrops dripped down Hime's pearly white cheeks.

"...This picture book, why?"

"It was at the bottom of the handbag my sister gave to me."

So Yuuhana-san found this picture book when she was moving all of Hime's manga to the warehouse.

She felt that all the other books were「pointless and threw them away, but only this book was different.

Because in the eyes of the Akishino sisters, this was a special story.

"Hey, Hime. Are you really okay with not seeing your sister off?"

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

It was 8:32 PM.

If I remembered correctly, the last special express train「Hanewa to Tokyo left around nine o'clock at night.

"If it's now, we should barely be able to make it."

Hime gazed at me with wide eyes.

"I want to go!"

Okay, so it's decided.

I snatched my wallet that I had left on the table, grabbed Hime's hand, and ran out the house after locking the door. I didn't even turn off the lights, but compared to the electricity costs, time was more precious right now.

At this hour, buses ran every half hour. To be honest, there was no way we could make it.

Our only choice was to run to the main road and flag down a taxi.

We cut across the residential area and ran through an alley. We arrived at the main road in a shorter amount of time than it took to get to school, but because of the hour, we couldn't find any taxis. There weren't many cars on the road in the first place. Damn! This is exactly the reason why I hate the countryside!

While Hime and I fumbled around the traffic light wondering「What should we do?! What should we do?!, a black high-class car suddenly stopped in front of our eyes.

The window beside the passenger seat rolled open—

"Hey, I found two idiots!"

A girl with silver hair and pigtails peeked out of the window, and the green light of the traffic light reflected off her face.

It was Mana. She fortuitously showed up at an impossibly good time.

"By any chance were you listening to the conversation earlier today?"

Mana winked at us like it was obvious.

"If Hime doesn't send her off, she won't be able to make the HAPPY END, right? Everything'd go to waste, right? So, hurry up and get in the car. If we don't drive quickly, we won't make it!"

Mana's endless chatter was cut short because Hime hugged her neck.

With red eyes, Hime shouted,

"Mana, I love you the most! My friend!"

"S-Sure, just hurry up and get in the car. I'm dying from the heat so let go and get in the car you fool!"

We received the tsundere's kindness and got in the car.

The baldheaded bodyguard dressed in black who once acted out a fight with me sat in the driver's seat. He still had this intimidating attitude, so it made me want to curl up by instinct. I remembered his name was… Yasuoka.

Yasuoka-san held the steering wheel and quietly spoke to me,

"Long time no see, high school boy."

"Y-Yes. Long time no see."

"Your injuries, do they still hurt?"

"T-They're fine now."

Although I was beat up pretty badly then, I didn't receive any scars by some miracle. It's probably because he meticulously used a technique to minimize injuries while he fought me.

"I'll be speeding, so if we get in a crash and you get scars, please forgive me."

As he said these dangerous words, the car rapidly accelerated.

I patted Hime's back as she hugged me with a pale face, myself terrified to death. The scenery outside the window whisked. I couldn't even tell what street we were speeding on.

"Don't worry. Even though he said that, Yasuoka will definitely not get us in a car crash."

Mana said this from the passenger's seat, but I really couldn't believe her!

Just after I thought we'd die about three times, the car suddenly started slowing down.

The scenery zoomed back into focus, and I recognized a familiar red roof. It was the Hanenoyama train station.

I glanced at my watch and it was 7:58 PM.

"The last train, Hanewa, leaves at 9:03 PM, so hurry up !"

Practically pushed out of the car by Mana, Hime and I got off the car.

"I'll send you guys off here. You're on your own for the return trip."

"I really can't thank you enough, Mana! Same with Yasuoka-san!"

We gave our thanks immediately after we got out.

Mana rolled open the window and stuck her head out.

"Oh right—there's one more thing I can't forget."

She took out a doujinshi, turned it open to me and shouted,

"Otaku! Really! Are! Disgusting————————!"

…Honestly!

We'll talk about Mana's shout of blood-curdling hatred later. We started sprinting towards the train station. With the spare change we prepared while on the car, we tossed it into the ticket vending machine and bought a platform pass. Like a marathon runner grabbing a drink, we snatched our tickets from station attendant and ran past checkpoint towards the No. 8 platform where the Hanewa train was.

We made it!

On the lonely platform, the station lighting shown on a black-haired girl who stood silently with her head lowered. Without a doubt, it was Akishino Yuuhana-san.

"W-Why are you here?"

When Yuuhana-san saw us, she was surprised.

Gasping for breath, I pushed Hime, who was similarly out of breath.

"Go Hime. There's something you have to say, isn't there?"

Hime nodded, wiped the sweat from her forehead, and stood in front of her sister.

Unlike earlier today, her head was not lowered.

Hime straightened her back and squarely showed herself to her sister.

"Onee-chan, there's something I want to tell you."

"...What is it?"

Her cheeks blushing, Hime gave a beautiful smile and made a very loud proclamation,

"There's someone I like!"

…Ehhhhhh!?

That's all she wanted to say? Hime?

She particularly came to see someone off, so why is she making such a lovestruck declaration?!

Look, even Yuuhana-san is shocked—

"Really? That's great."

Huh, wait? She's actually smiling?

Her smile was just like she blessed her little sister's love. It glittered as it blossomed.

"But, I have a lot of rivals."

"That's not a big deal, Himeka. Just like me, you're very beautiful… you've got to try your best."

"Mmn."

While the train speedily entered the platform, the two sisters tightly hugged each other.

"Well then, Kidou-kun. I leave my sister to you."

"Ah, um…"

Just before she got on the train, her lips quietly drew close to my ear.

"Unexpectedly, my little sister has a big chest. Have you taken advantage of it yet?"

"I don't know!"

Ummmm, actually I did know! But even so I needed to pretend I didn't!

With my face entirely red, the chimes of the departing train rang.

With the heavy resounding rings, the train slowly started to move.

"Eita, what did my sister say to you?"

"She didn't say anything…"

"You're mean. Hug me?"

"No, I don't want to hug you!"

While Hime hugged my right arm, I tried to divert my attention from it. Please don't pay attention that that, um, that very soft thing there. Then I thought of something.

"...Ah, when the next school semester starts, it'll be fine ."

I mumbled quietly as my ex-girlfriend titled her head from incomprehension.

"Also, can you lend me the newest volume of「Holy Dragon?"

【自演の女王】夏川真涼

最大LV.60

攻 5000

守 1

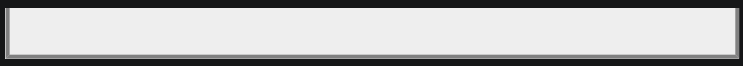
特技：中2ノート朗読

♥プロフィール♥
「真に涼しい、と書いて真涼です。ふふふ…」

♥親愛度UP♥
「許してあげまりゅ」

♥親愛度MAX♥
「他の女と話した数だけ刺します」

[27]



#4: Masuzu, Hunting the Lovestruck

#4 真涼、恋愛脳狩り

It was a certain morning just a short period of time before the end of summer vacation.

【**From** oraoraoraoraoraoraoraoraoraora@xxxx.mail.ne.jp

【**Subject** Morn'g, Ora-Masuzu!

Crap.....

Even though it was a text message from my girlfriend, just looking at the subject alone made me want to trash it!

However, I reluctantly opened the message because the consequences of ignoring it would have been more terrifying.

【Message We are going on a Hunt . Please make preparations.

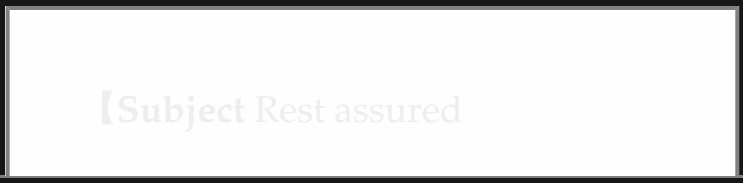
What *hunt*? After I sent my response, I received another message.

"....."

I could smell the scent of danger from that response.

It looks like this girl was finally going to stain her hands with a criminal act. Was she planning to go about massacring couples indiscriminately?

I won't go along with it if it's something dangerous—I replied—



【**Message** We won't be breaking the law. Just barely though.

"Which one is it!?"

With a hint of gloominess in my voice, I threw a remark at the text message. State clearly whether you are actually crossing the line or not!

As I was thinking about how to reply, another message came before I could do anything.

【**Subject** Please

【**Message** I need your strength to defeat the lovestruck.

Holy Dragon Knight of Dawn 《 Burning Fighting Fighter .

Lend me the strength of your light.

She suddenly said something that Hime would say.

Since the direct attack didn't work, she went for a back-sided assault, huh? That probably showed how much she wanted me to go with her on this 「Lovestruck Hunt.

Well, whichever way it was, I couldn't go against the will of my great "Girlfriend". And, she did say something pretty scary while we were arguing with Hime's big sister. I was originally planning to go study in the local library, but it seemed like I needed to change my plans.

"Besides....."

Regarding the matter where I was kissed by Chiwa during our summer training camp, Masuzu had yet to cross-examine me on that—I wondered what she really thought about it.

I really couldn't predict what kind of actions she would take.

That was why I was worried.

"I just hope she doesn't go on a crazy rampage....."

♦

Although we normally meet at the cafe in front of the station, today we decided to scrimp and chose a fast food restaurant instead. After all, we had used up quite a bit of our allowance at the training camp and whatnot. We had to be frugal.

However, that somehow turned out to be a bad idea—

"Woah."

As I looked at the crowd of people in the restaurant, not counting the line at the payment counter, I came to realize that I had erred in my judgement.

A 「Masuzu doughnut phenomenon had occurred.

What was the 'Masuzu doughnut phenomenon'? It was a way of describing how people put a 「strange distance away from the gorgeous looking yet seemingly hard-to-approach Masuzu, and form a circle around her. A white space had cleared a three-meter radius away

from Masuzu, resembling the 'hole' of a doughnut, which was what led to the coining of that term. By moi.

"She's cute." "Beautiful." "Go talk to her." "No way, you go." I pushed through the crowd of curious onlookers and stepped into the hole of the doughnut.

"Eita, aren't you late?"

Masuzu, who was sitting uncomfortably, looked up at me with a sign of apparent relief.

Her hairstyle was different from usual.

Her trademark silver hair was tied with a white ribbon at the back. Masuzu, who normally appeared to be older, looked more like a high school girl. Her current hairstyle probably made her look younger.

Her outfit, also different from usual, was made up of a sleeveless one-piece dress and a pair of red mules. Usually preferring something comfortable, it was rare for Masuzu to wear something that revealed her shoulders and thighs in such an alluring way. I wonder what kind of change had come over her.

"Anyway, let's get out of here."

"Roger."

Masuzu stood up, and as if losing her sense, she entwined her arm around mine.

A murmuring of sighs arose from around us, and looks of resentment from the guys locked on to me.

"What are you up to?"

"Let's just get out of here. There are too many onlookers here."

Dragged by Masuzu by the arm, we exited the restaurant.

After walking for a while in the opposite direction of the ticket barriers of the station, we sat down on a bench along the riverbank by the roadside trees.

"We can talk more leisurely here."

"Yeah—But before that."

Masuzu, who was sitting beside me, suddenly brought her face close to me,

"Isn't there something you ought to tell me after seeing my appearance today?"

On saying that, she bent her body, and her largely open bosom was almost visible, aah, the base of her white bulges arrreeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

"W-well, nothing actually?"

I averted my gaze and coughed.

"Fuhn. Even when my Jojo-cute charm was making you so lightheaded."

"It didn't though. And what's Jojo-cute, aren't you being too liberal with your Japanese?"

"......dummy."

Masuzu pouted with a hint of boredom.

"More importantly, what's up with that text message, about the 『Hunt on the Lovestruck?"

"Yeah. First, look at this."

Masuzu took out a magazine from her tote bag, flipped to a page which was tagged and showed it to me.

"What's this? They even do features on good roadside parking spots?"
Rojou-Chuusha

I initially thought this was from some antisocial magazine, but it actually turned out to be from 「Hanenoyama Walker, a normal magazine covering information about the town.

"Roadside-Kiss is short for 'Kissing by the Roadside'. In other words, it's referring to outdoor spots where you can kiss."
Rojou-Chuu

"Huuh.....? Why would people kiss outside? Is that to show off to others?"

"It's to tell others that, the man who steals my red lips in front of others, lays bare his virginity."

"Wha, idiot... it's just that kind of event so it can't be helped right!"

And, it has nothing to do with virginity!

He doesn't lay it bare, don't be so disrespectful to the boyfriend hey you!

"It just means that, doesn't it? It's because it's more wild and hot to have others watch."

"I see. A beast huh."

There really were such terrible people. Did the morals of the folks in Hanenoyama town fall so much?

"As people who have a good amount of pride in our anti-love views, we can't allow such loose people to continue their atrocities. That's why Eita, you shall disrupt them."

"Me!?"

You do it! Why are you making others do your dirty work?

"Just kidding. Let's shake hands and hunt together, shall we?"

"....."

At any rate, it was decided that I would be involved.

"I get what you mean. But how? I don't want to commit a crime."

"It'll be fine. We are just going to point our fingers and laugh at them. 'Oh my, these guys are kissing. How shameless!'. Even the lovestruck ones will be embarrassed and run away."

".....sounds like what elementary kids would do....."

I kind of felt that it would be just as embarrassing for us though.

"Well, if you die, I'll be with you."

"I don't want to die."

"Now, L-E-T-'S H-U-N-T! Otherwise, K-I-L-L Y-O-U!"

"I don't want to die, I said!?"

As she uttered her strange English (even though she had come back from a foreign country), Masuzu stood up and walked briskly.

For a moment, I was thinking of going home—but then I thought about the nightmares that I would have as the "boyfriend" if I saw Masuzu's name decorating the headlines of the news tomorrow.

In order to prevent her from losing her head and staining her hands from a criminal act, I had no choice but to follow along to keep an eye on her.....

And so.

We came to the junction west of Hanenoyama Elementary School, one of the 「Roadside Kiss Spots as listed in the magazine.

Masuzu pointed to the stairs of a pedestrian bridge,

"It's likely that a crime will take place on top of that."

It was a place that hardly any people passed through, apart from elementary students commuting to school in the morning. But it was not totally nil, as there were times when a housewife buying things from a nearby supermarket would walk by. It seemed like a place where one could experience the thrill of 'being seen'.

"So, how do we stake this place out?"

"Yeah....."

Masuzu looked around, and then pointed at a sign, which was in the shape of a policeman beside the bridge.

"We shall hide behind that, and wait for foolish couples. When they start climbing the bridge, we will secretly follow behind. When they kiss, we'll cry ' Shameless'."

"....."

No matter how I looked at it, it was pretty childish.

Besides, the sign was a little too small for the both of us to completely hide ourselves behind it.

"Hey Eita, stick closer to me."

"Nah, it's fine. It's uncomfortably hot."

Masuzu glared at me with displeasure when I kept my distance,

"This is a hunting ground you know? It's either kill or be killed. Hot or cold aside, what if we get seen by our prey?"

She said it unsparingly.

I had no choice but to comply with Masuzu's wishes, however—

"......?"

Hnn?

Why was her face so red?

Her fists were clenched.

Her feet were fidgety. It wasn't like Masuzu to be so unsettled.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Masuzu tried to act normal.

But it was weird.

Just now, we were just sticking shoulder to shoulder, but before I knew it, she was leaning against me, clinging on to me.

Additionally, her head rested on my shoulder, and her eyes were closed, absorbed.

Her head slid down and slowly got closer to my chest.

"Our prey's not coming."

"......yeah."

Masuzu gave a small sigh. Her silver ponytail dangled before my eyes.

I frantically tried to change the topic to calm my thumping heart.

"Ah, but, you know. Speaking of pedestrian bridge, it reminds me. The summer vacation special episode of ' Punishment Extreme'[28]."

"..... mo-nyo."

"How Yasu-san managed to persuade the perpetrator who was going to jump off the pedestrian bridge with his tears! That heated scene really kept me on my chair. Although, I think he would have been alright if he just opened his parachute."

"Mo-nyo, mo-nyo."

"Although despising crimes and not the people is just one of the many themes of 『Maguke, this episode really emphasized that to the fullest. You could say it was one of the strongest plots this year, right?"

"Mo-nyo—"

"—Hey, hold on a second!"

I grabbed Masuzu's shoulders as she was repeatedly rubbing her face against my chest.

"What in the world have you been doing!"

Masuzu immediately straightened herself up and sternly collected herself.

"I was concentrating my five senses to their utmost limits, attempting to detect the「spiritual energy of the lovestruck."

"You're lying. You were totally saying things like「Mo-nyo."

"Yes, I was practicing my shouts for using Ripple Powers.[29]"

"Why are you practicing using Ripple!? Where do you see zombies!? [30]

"Also the more I train, the better the color changes." [31]

"Why are you mixing up your references!?"

Anyhow, I better keep my distance from Masuzu. Besides, there was a heatwave today in the 30's[32], so it was so hot it was unbearable.

Masuzu looked grumpy and she mumbled things like, 「But I'm your girlfriend... But I'm your girlfriend... But I'm your girlfriend. Did she actually forget the goal that we started out with?

Honestly...

It's so exhausting to have a 「girlfriend with Jojo-cute charm.

♦

About two hours later—

We continued our unproductive stake-out, but there was not a sign of any 「Roadside Kiss couples.

By the way, we did legitimately see a roadside *parked* car, but ten minutes later a police car came and gave it a parking ticket. While it's there, can't the police take a detour and stop this annoying girl beside me?

"We weren't able to HUNT in the end."

"Yeah…"

We sighed under the light of setting sun as we bought juice from the vending machines next to the pedestrian bridge.

"But isn't that a good thing? It means our town hasn't completely abandoned morals yet."

"No that's not enough. How is it okay if we didn't accomplish the original goals we started out with? What will happen to our self-respect as Anti-Love (lol) individuals?"

"Did you just add a (lol) to the end of that? Really? Really?"

This girl really was contradicting herself. I couldn't make any sense of it.

"So what are we going to do? Come back another day?"

"No."

Masuzu definitively shook her head back and forth.

"Instead, we'll perform a roadside kiss."

……Huh?

"Huh? What did you say? Come again?"

"Perform a roadside kiss."

"With who?"

"...M-Me and you."

"Huh?"

Masuzu spoke very loudly,

"Natsukawa Masuzu and Kidou Eita w-will, on top of the pedestrian bridge… kiss!"

"..."

What kind of junk was this girl saying with her entire face blushing red…?

"Wait, why?"

"It'd be too boring if we left without witnessing any roadside kisses. It'd be stupid."

"So?"

"S-So at the very least—we'll be the ones to kiss to warm up the stage."

"..."

Honestly—

Honestly. Honestly. This really was Jien-Otsu!

"No thanks. I'm going home. Bye."

I tossed my empty can of Coca Cola into the trashcan and took a step forward.

Masuzu chased after me and walked by my side,

"But you even kissed with *her*."

She glared at me with eyes that looked like they were staring at her enemy… but why was she hugging onto my arm so tightly? Honestly, her actions didn't match with her words today at all.

"That wasn't on the roadside, and she was the one who initiated it. Did you see it?"

"I saw it alright. Your entire existence is so perverted, it's obscene. Before you know it, you'll get pregnant."

"No way you s-stupid—idiot!"

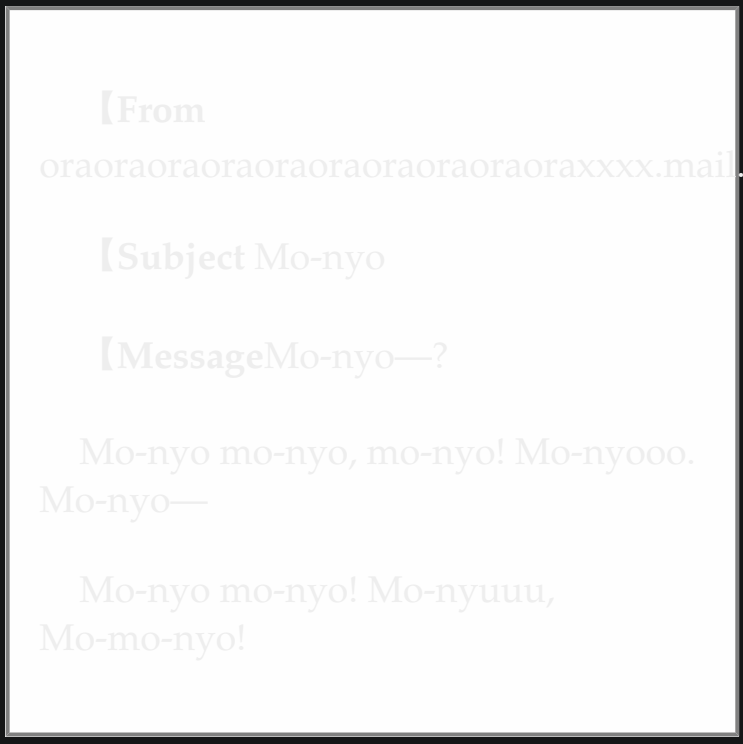
We fought like little kids on the way home.

♦

Three days passed without any messages from Masuzu.

I was happy to be studying without any disturbances, but when I thought about how she'd retaliate once the new school semester starts, I started to feel depressed—

Just when I was eating cold soba for lunch at home, I received a text message, sweeping away all the feelings of happiness and depression.



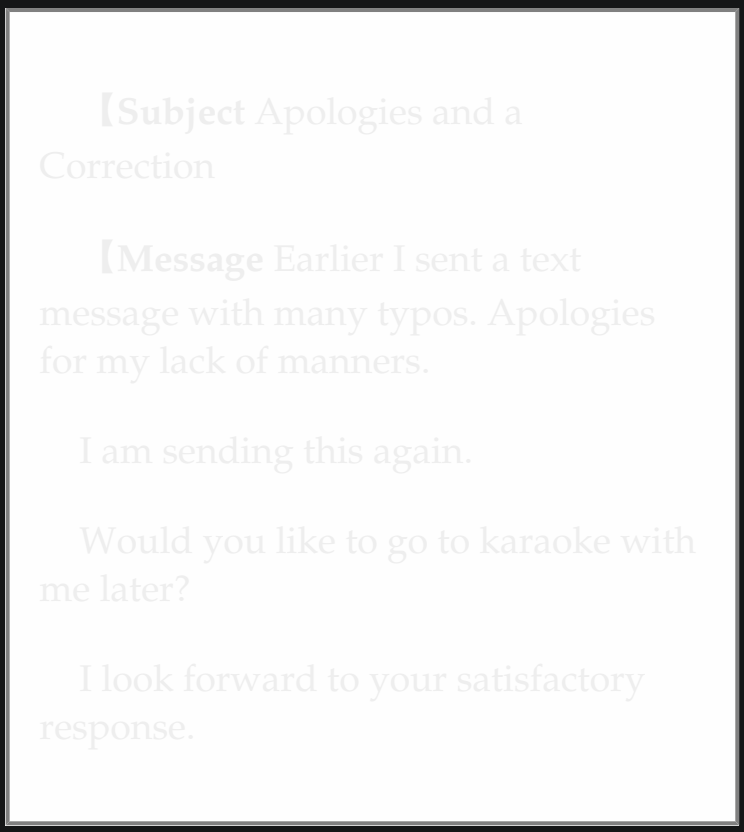
"...She's…"

She's finally...

She's finally broken!

Ever since the club trip, I felt like she's been out of control. But I had no idea that she had worsened to this extent. I profoundly felt the weight of responsibility as her「boyfriend.

Just as I was contemplating whether I should match her enthusiasm and respond with「Mo-nyo~?, I received a follow-up message soon afterwards.


【**Subject** Apologies and a Correction

【**Message** Earlier I sent a text message with many typos. Apologies for my lack of manners.

I am sending this again.

Would you like to go to karaoke with me later?

I look forward to your satisfactory response.

It was completely different from earlier, and the content was very serious.

How the hell could you make such a different a message from typos? It was way above the level to merely be considered a typo.

"That being said, karaoke…"

Such an unexpected invitation.

Did that girl like karaoke? But she didn't look like the type of person who liked singing.

When I thought about it carefully, Masuzu and I have been dating for three months. If you included the amount of time before we agreed to be a fake couple, it was barely five months. It wasn't strange for us not to know each other's interests.

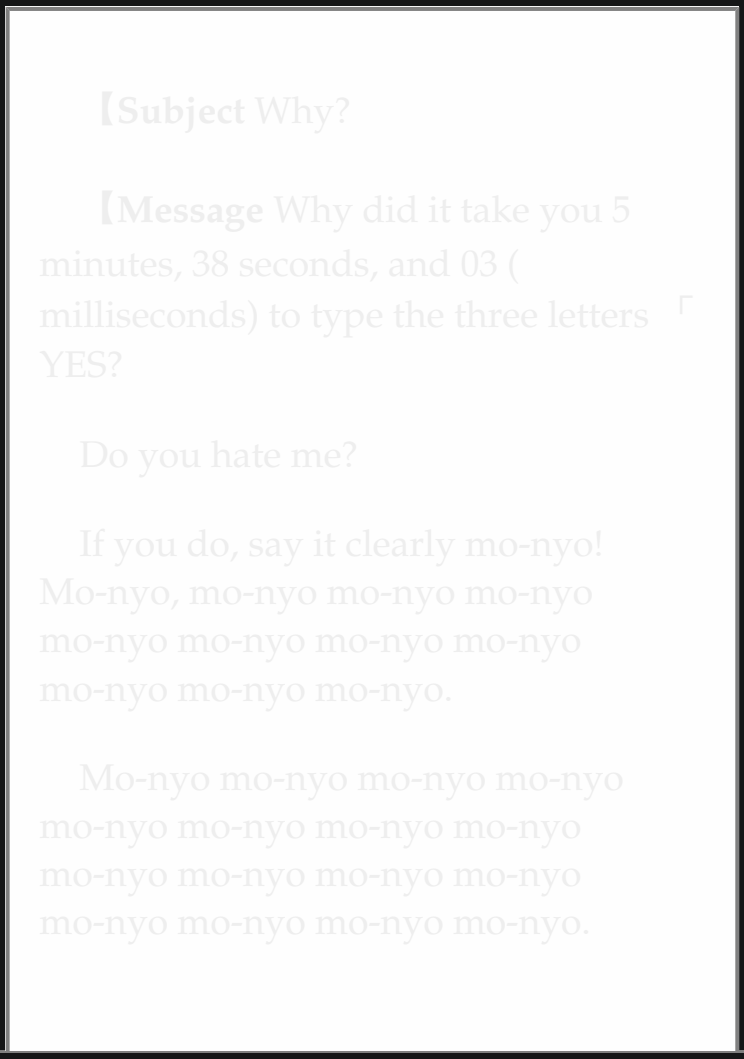
"...No, wait a moment."

Perhaps her real plan was something like「Hunting the Lovestruck from several days ago.

Karaoke was also a place people went for dates, and if we went in the afternoon during the summer, there

would certainly be at least a few couples there. Don't tell me she planned to massacre those people…?

Just then that cursed text message ringtone sounded—


【Subject Why?
【Message Why did it take you 5 minutes, 38 seconds, and 03 (milliseconds) to type the three letters YES?
Do you hate me?
If you do, say it clearly mo-nyo! Mo-nyo, mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo.
Mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo.

Mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo.

Mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo.

Mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo.

Mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo.

Mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo mo-nyo.

"........How terrifying!"

It was pretty ordinary for Masuzu to be terrifying, but this time I was struck with a different kind of terror.

So basically, the point was I had to respond with a YES ? Why did she have to measure the time and send it back to me? How much ill will did she have for her fake boyfriend? It simply didn't make sense!

…Ugh.

If I had responded NO this time, I couldn't imagine what kind of actions she would have taken.

It looked like arguing was not an option today, too.

"I'm beginning to feel like she's starting to turn into a very troubling little sister."

This was in contrast with Chiwa's declaration that she'd stop being a「family member.

Perhaps girlfriends tended to walk on opposite roads than childhood friends.

♦

Having learned my lesson from last time, today we met at the usual coffee shop.

I came a full five minutes earlier than our appointed time, but Masuzu was there already. Now that I thought about it, it was always like that. She's never arrived later than I did.

"What it is, Eita? Why don't you come and sit right here?"

Masuzu tilted her head sideways with a questioning look as she held a coffee cup.

Like usual, she was monopolizing all of the attention inside the shop. Including the male and female restaurant employees, there wasn't anyone who didn't steal glances at Masuzu from time to time.

However, today's stares were a different kind than usual.

"...Why are you wearing that kind of clothes?"

"Huh?"

Masuzu looked at me with a surprised expression and then glanced back at her own clothes.

"What's so weird about this outfit?"

"Well, you can't quite call it weird…"

It was a formal evening gown.

Not the fluffy and wavy type. Rather, it was a long dress with a sleek design. It bared her glossy shoulders and revealed rather dangerous curves near her stomach. Quite incredibly, it carried an extremely graceful aura. Even the silver color of the dress was high-class, which shimmered with a dazzling brilliance even under the cheap lighting of the cafe. It was woven almost like real silver.

Though, Masuzu's silver hair was the most dazzling—

"...Hey, are you going to sit?"

Masuzu looked like she was hugging herself, her cheeks red.

Perhaps it was because I had unintentionally started staring at her.

"A-ahhh, sorry."

I shook my head substantially and sat opposite of Masuzu.

"Which party were you planning on attending, dressed up like that?"

"Ah, my goal is to be the number one warrior."

"Not a fighting party! [33] I'm talking about the dancing one! I'm asking if you're going to a ballroom party."

"What are you talking about? I said we're going to karaoke."

"..."

This didn't fit at all.

"No one wears evening gowns to karaoke."

"Why? I thought that since we're going to a public singing venue, this kind of attire should be expected."

Masuzu looked blank.

It looked like she wasn't deliberately acting stupid for once. Rather, she really didn't understand this time.

"Could it be that you've never gone to karaoke before?"

"Mh, you could say so."

"Is this very normal in the country you used to live in?"

"We didn't have a karaoke culture. Instead, when we entertained guests, we brought them to operas or concerts."

"I see."

Until three months ago, Masuzu's lived outside of Japan since she was nine years old.

Nine years old would be third grade, which was before the age most went to karaoke. Even I didn't go to karaoke until I was in fifth grade, when Chiwa's dad brought us for the first time.

"Do you know what the karaoke place is like?"

"Yes. It's a place where one is shut up in a private room with one's intimate lover, in which they pleasure themselves with drinks and food while publicly singing and sharing love."

"That's about righ—wait a second, what was that last thing? Sharing love?"

"Chestnuts three years, persimmons eight years."[34]

"A proverb!?"

What kind of deceptive ideas were those? That being said, as someone who grew up outside of Japan, how did she know something like that?

Anyways, it made me feel a little relieved now that I knew we weren't trying to「hunt the lovestruck this time.

"But, what made you suddenly want to go to karaoke?"

When Masuzu heard this, she took out a ticket from her purse with a very pleased expression on her face. It was a discount voucher for a karaoke box a couple minutes away from here by walking.

"Woah, a 30% discount? Not bad."

"Right? This was with a flier in the paper this morning, so I figured we'd just go."

That was such a commoner's way of thinking, it clashed with the outfit she was currently wearing at MAX levels.

"Yeah, after all, seventy percent is pretty good for a high school student—"

"...That's not the point…"

I ignored Masuzu who continued to whisper things, and started moving forward.

♦

The front desk of the karaoke store had a lot of students.

Middle school students, high school students, and college students filled the place with a mood like they wanted to have fun straight until the end of summer and reality flushes everything out. It was quite dangerous. For a elitist person like me, I was afraid of suffocating from it.

"We'll have to wait an hour for an empty room. Want to go somewhere else?"

"Nah, we rarely come anyways, so let's just wait."

There were a lot of people similarly waiting for empty rooms on the couches in the reception area.

Because of Masuzu's outfit, we tried to sit in a relatively inconspicuous corner, but—

"Hey? Is that Kidou-kun?"

"Natsukawa-san as well~ Hello!

The two people who called out to us were Sakagami-san and Akano Mei-san from our class.

Sakagami-san was the little brother of Sakagami-senpai who Chiwa once beat up during the「Popularity Fight.

Akano Mei-san was a girl who had many friends and good relationships with everyone. You could say she had a pretty close relationship with Chiwa.

"H-Heyyy, what a coincidence."

I quite awkwardly responded while I tried to confirm if there was anyone else with them. What was with these two? Were they dating? Wait, but friends also went to karaoke together too, right? I wasn't very familiar with what was the norm nowadays.

As for Masuzu, she quietly said「Hello rather gloomily. Afterwards, she just lowered her head.

How strange.

Normally, Masuzu would switch to「interacting with strangers mode, give a perfect smile, and respond suavely and thoughtfully.

"Haha, it's quite a surprise—you two don't give the impression that you're the type for coming to this kind of place—"

"Hahaha, w-what kind of type is that? Isn't that rather impolite to the most famous couple in our school?"

Sakagami-san and Akano-san sat down on a nearby sofa and started chatting.

"Natsukawa-san's wearing such a beautiful dress—is that an evening gown?"

"It looks like the rumor that she's a rich ojou-sama is true—heey, how much did that outfit cost?"

"Aren't you an idiot!? You don't normally ask those things—"

"It doesn't hurt to just ask once—"

Sigh...

They seemed rather incompatible.

Why did this conversation give vibes like they were「making cutting remarks about our flaws ? It wasn't like they were bad people.

After a little while, Sakagami's name was broadcast over the intercom.

"Excuse us, but we'll be going in first—"

The two of them gave a small wave and disappeared into a room.

I gave a relieved sigh. However, Masuzu pinched the back of my hand quite forcefully.

"Ouch————————that hurts! Masuzu-san what the hell are you doing?!"

"Why were you watching that girl the whole time?"

Her eyes were inflamed as she peered at my face. How terrifying!

"What were you thinking? I was sitting right next to you! Don't tell me you think that girl is more beautiful."

"O-Of course I wasn't looking Akano-san the whole time! Sakagami-san was right next to her!"

"Huh? Sakagami-san was also there?"

".....You didn't notice?"

Masuzu nodded.

Sakagami-san was talking about her, and he even greeted Masuzu. Why didn't she notice?

Masuzu's expression was totally awful as she stared at me,

"Hey, tell me clearly. Is Akano Mei-san more beautiful than me? Hey!"

"...and if I say YES?"

"First, I'll stab out your eyes."

"There's more after that?!"

Even though the air conditioning was on, I had already started sweating.

I didn't have a choice. Looks like I had to tell the truth.

"M-Masuzu-san is more beautiful."

"By a significant margin?"

"Yes, by a significant margin…"

When Masuzu heard this, she suddenly became bashful and shy. She traced a 「on the sofa as she spoke,

"I h-hate it! Honestly Eita, don't say such lovestruck words."

"If you're going to be embarrassed, then don't ask me to say that from the start! Besides, you're the one who added the significant margin part yourself—!"

My shout was met by an echo that overlapped with my voice. At nearly the same time, my name had been called over the intercom.

♦

After we were led into a private room, we ordered drinks and snacks. Then, I sank deeply into the sofa.

"H-How exhausting…!"

I had no idea waiting for karaoke could be so tiring. Before we even started singing, I had been bombarded non-stop with maliciousness and my stomach hurt because of my「girlfriend's jealousy.

As for Masuzu, she energetically fiddled with the buttons of the remote control while she sat next to me. It looked like they didn't use songbooks here. Everything was completely electronicized, so songs were input through the controller.

"How do you use this device?"

"Uh—can't you just randomly push it?"

"Like this?"

Masuzu spoke as she lightly used her finger to poke my left cheek.

"W-What the hell are you doing?"

"Well you said I could push it randomly."

"I said you could press the controller!"

Enough! Give it to me! I grabbed the remote from her.

"I'll operate it. Tell me the name of a song."

Masuzu stared blankly when she heard this,

"Huh? Song? Who wants to sing?"

"You of course. Didn't you want to sing karaoke?"

"Yeah, but I was lying."

"Lying?!"

The astonishing fact had just been revealed.

W-What was the point for all of today's troublesome work...?

"What do you mean by you're lying!? I'd sue you regardless of the circumstances!"

Masuzu's tone was completely calm as she responded.

"If you want my honest reply, I didn't really want to「sing karaoke. Rather, I wanted to go to karaoke."

"...?"

What did that mean? Wasn't that the same thing?

"If you go to a karaoke bar but don't sing karaoke, what else are you supposed to do?"

Well, I have heard of people using it as a conference room or as a hotel for staying the whole night. However, I didn't think this girl would think of it for those kinds of applications.

"This well…"

Masuzu's articulate words stopped again and she leaned against me as she peered at my face.

Her expression was incomparably serious and tense.

How did that make sense…?

What did she so desperately want in a karaoke box that would make her act like this?

"Recently... I've… always…"

I could hear Masuzu's heart racing with her chest pressed so close. Like this, she'd also be able to hear my heart beat.

I held my breath as I waited for Masuzu to continue.

—Mo-nyo.

"...Huh?"

"Recently… I've… haven't been able to mo-nyo…"

I gazed into the depths of her blue eyes, trying to interpret the meaning of her words.

I asked her,

"Mo-nyo?"

Masuzu nodded.

"Mo-nyo."

I asked again,

"Mo-nyo?"

She nodded and said,

"Mo-nyo."

I flipped out,

"Mo-nyooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!!"

What the hell was with this giiiiiiirlllllllllllll!!!!!!!!!?

Now I understood why that text message she sent was so terrifying!

All along, it was a「clinical deficiency of Mo-nyo! So basically that was her motive from the start?!

"The condition of my body falls apart if I don't perform mo-nyo at least once a week."

"No way!"

My body was the one that would fall apart like this!

"Because you never let me do it in the past, and since I thought you'd find it embarrassing, I lured you to private places where no one else would see us, Eita."

"Your existence seriously is such an annoyance for others!"

"...You won't let me do it?"

Masuzu gazed up at me with eyes like an abandoned puppy.

They were heartfelt eyes that appealed to a man's—no, more accurately, humanity's, conscience.

I felt extremely embarrassed and averted my eyes,

"That being said, why me? Aren't there others you can do it with?"

"How could there be anyone else?"

She returned the question.

"I don't have friends or lovers. I don't even have parents; the only thing I have… is my accomplice."

"...Masuzu…"

I stared at my「girlfriend for a while.

Lively singing noises reverberated from other nearby rooms, and it made me feel empty as if I was living in another world. This was a space that only Masuzu and I shared. It was like we were drifting away in a separate dimension.

Ordinary high school students could be expected to talk about love, but for us it was impossible.

We could only make a shoddy and forged imitation.

"...I get it."

I sighed and spoke,

"I'll lend you my chest, so rub it however you like."

"Thank you."

Masuzu had an innocent and honest smile like a child.

Sigh...

Though it did seem to circulate a slightly serious aura.

But if all she wanted to do was「mo-nyo...

"Well, then I'll be helping myself."

"G-Go ahead."

"... ♪"

When I spread apart my arms and opened up my chest , Masuzu immediately buried her head inside with delight.

I held this soft tender body that pressed up against me.

The texture of her glossy dress fabric rustling against my shirt felt really good, but I could also feel the full weight of those two amply plump and swelling objects squeezing under there—but I didn't react. Masuzu was so carried away!

Accompanied with minute sighs, she repeatedly rubbed her face against my chest many times.

This was the so-called「mo-nyo.

I had no idea how it had gotten that name, but the instinctive feel for it was rather fitting.

Aah, even so, it was so soft...

"Here's your order of Oolong tea and Coca Cola. Sorry for the wait—"

In the split second after the waitress opened the door, Masuzu was the first to react.

Like a thunderbolt ignoring the limitations of speed, she sent me flying with a shove and immediately picked up a remote. She spoke loudly, 「I wonder what we should sing next, hehahaha.

However, I didn't lose to her. Although the momentum was ferocious enough to send me rolling on the ground, I immediately recovered myself and sat up.

"That's weird? The microphone? Where'd the microphone go?

"Excuse me, miss and mister?"

"MY NAME IS MIKE DAIVIS! Yeah! Hahaha!"

"...Excuse me…"

The waitress had been standing at the entrance carrying a plate of drinks the entire time.

"OH EITO-KUN, IT SEAMS LAIK THE DRINKS WHEE ORDERED CAME!"

"OH REALY, I DIDN'T NOTISE AT ALL HAHA."

We took the plate of drinks while acting like robots and watched the shocked waitress with a smile.

When the door closed, the two of us practically sighed at the same time.

"Looks like we barely passed that one."

"That was dangerous… if we were seen at a time like that, our names would have disgracefully gone down in history."

After all, since we had the self-esteem as anti-love individuals, we couldn't allow ourselves to be caught in an act that would be misunderstood as head-over-heels in love.

Masuzu took a gulp of Oolong tea.

"I feel quite disappointed."

"Was that mo-nyo enough?"

"Yes… although I feel quite dissatisfied, I'm about four fifths full."

"Does that even go to your stomach…?"

It gets absorbed after digestion into nutrients? What kind of digestive tract did this girl have?

"Well, let's sing karaoke normally for the rest of the time."

"Let's do that."

And just like that, we sang for the remainder of the time.

At first, Masuzu didn't want to sing because「she didn't know any songs, but after realizing there were nursery rhymes on the playlist, she slowly started to sing as well. It looks like she didn't actually hate singing.

"Hey, can you put「Inunoomawarisan on next?" [35]

"Wan wan wan wan?" [36]

"Wan wan wan wan ♪"

Woahh, Masuzu-san was just like an angel!

If she could always stay cute like this, it'd be great. Though, this probably wasn't something I should say to my「girlfriend. Could you consider this an impossible wish?

The happy hour flew by and soon it was time to return the private room. But we felt like we hadn't sung enough. Should we extend it? Leave? We discussed it between ourselves—

"Masuzu, I suddenly realized something."

"Hehe do you want to order something before we extend our time?"

"Not that… but don't you feel like we've almost become like normal lovers?"

We were sitting in a private room where there was no one else.

So basically there was no reason to go out of our way to act as a couple.

It was an ordinary date.

"..."

Masuzu was stunned, and she stared at me for a while.

She suddenly slapped the table with some force, causing the empty glasses to jump.

"H-How the heck did that happen?! Without realizing it, we actually became so… lovestruck!"

"But it was just you."

"We can't, Eita! This is just like… when you become a freak even though you're trying to fight freaks! While battling lovestruck beings like Harusaki-san and them all , we've unconsciously corroded."

"R-Really?"

I had only wanted to try saying what was on my mind, but I didn't realize Masuzu would take this kind of thing so seriously.

Masuzu cleverly stood up and returned the microphone and remote control on the battery charger.

"We better keep our distance for the time being. The next time we meet will be in prison."

"Why?! Can't we meet again while we're free?!"

"Oh, my bad. The next time we meet will be at school."

How could you misspeak something like that?

That being said, there was only about a week left of vacation, so it made sense?

"Text messages are forbidden, and of course phone calls as well. Is that alright? Eita, even though I know you really want to hear my voice, you'll have to show restraint. Show some restraint, okay?"

"Okay…"

Ah—

Let's talk about her voice later, but I still kind of wanted to hear another nursery rhyme from Masuzu...

♦

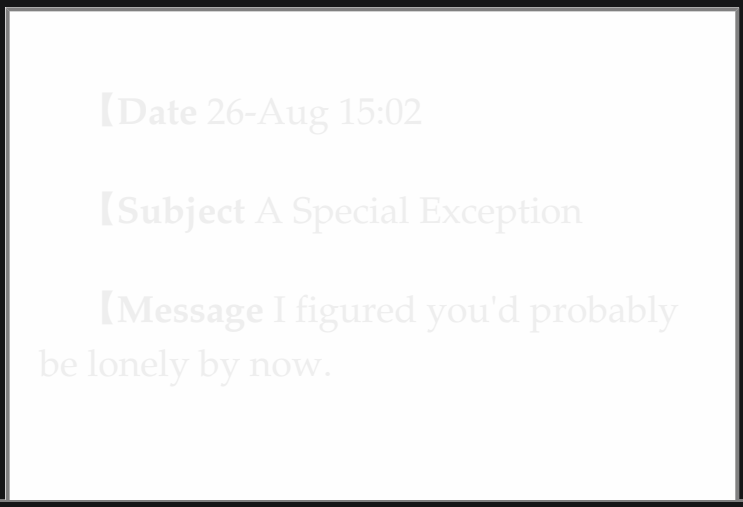
The next day after the karaoke incident—

The cursed text message ringtone that I wasn't supposed to hear until the next semester promptly rang in my room.

"What's going on…?"

I put down the english translation problems I currently working on and opened my cellphone.

I even thought it would be something urgent—



So in the few days until the next school semester, you can just keep re-reading this one text message and restrain yourself.

"What do you mean by, 'by now'? Hasn't only one day passed since yesterday?"

Furthermore, when I said goodbye to that girl yesterday, it was seven o'clock in the evening. So in other words, not even twenty four hours have passed. How was I supposed to be lonely?

I ignored the message and continued studying, but after a while the cursed melody beeped once again.

【**Date** 15:33

【**Subject** A Particularly Special Exception

【**Message** I know Eita also has the innate drives of a young man.

This, I'm very understanding of.

I'm also a very lenient woman, so I've decided that was a very pitiable thing about you.

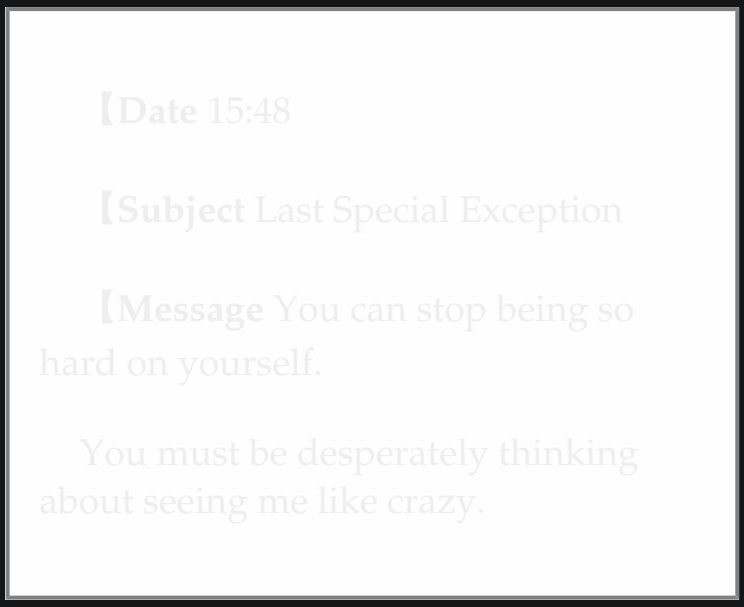
"...Huh? So?"

What was the point of this text message?

I couldn't understand what she was trying to express. All I could sense was an indescribable arrogant attitude.

Compared to this, this last few days before the end of the summer vacation was much more important. If you study and do your work well, this can have a major impact on your grades the next semester. Even if I was number one at Hane High, I wasn't impressive at all compared to everyone else who was applying for medical school. I had to study hard in order to make it.

But within twenty minutes, another message came.


【**Date** 15:48

【**Subject** Last Special Exception

【**Message** You can stop being so hard on yourself.

You must be desperately thinking about seeing me like crazy.

"Huh? But I'm not?"

Besides, we'll meet each other in a couple days at school. Right now, I wanted to concentrate my mind on studying.

In the time it took for me to put down my cell phone and pick up my mechanical pencil, another one came.

【**Date** 15:58

"Arghhh, this girl so annoying!"

That was supposed to be the last one! If she doesn't understand she has to finish the things she starts, honestly it'll perpetually be in disarray!

Even with my emotions riled up like this, I still couldn't reply! I threw my phone onto my bed. At least wait for me to finish this problem set. Before that, I won't look.

My cellphone continuously received deadly cursed text messages, but I cold-heartedly ignored them all.

—About an hour later.

"Huff…"

Finally at the end of a set, I closed my notebook and relaxed the muscles in my shoulders.

"Let's take a look… how is Masuzu-san?"

I opened my mail inbox and found a whole string of consecutive text messages from my「girlfriend.

【**Date** 16:07

【**Subject** No more than three things

【**Content** Be careful!

I might be under attack by an enemy Stand! [37]

【**Date** 16:19

【**Subject** Fourth Special Exception

【**Message** Saaveeee me! There's a man I don't recognize in front of my apartment.

So scary…!

【**Date** 16:30

【**Subject** Perhaps… a Fifth Time?

【**Message** Now, can you see my face slightly in your mind's eye? (lol)

【**Date** 16:41

【**Subject** You're making me angry

【**Subject** Curse you curse you curse you curse you curse you curse you curse you curse you curse you.

【**Date** 16:42

【**Subject** I apologize

【**Message** Sorry, I was lying earlier. Please forgive me.

【**Date** 16:58

【**Subject** I SINCERELY WISH YOU HAPPINESS! [38]

【**Message** I've had enough. I don't care if you're like this.

As long as you happy with Harusaki-san or whoever, that's fine?

arriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarri

arriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarriarri

arriarriarrivederci! (Until we meet again) [39]

"...Why does she seem happier than I imagined…?"

Even though her message was so upsetting, for some reason her texting seemed so indescribably full of energy ?

Just then, the newest message arrived.

【**Date** 17:20

【**Subject** No subject

【**Message** I'M IN FRONT OF YOUR HOUSE

"That's too sudden, isn't it?!"

Practically confirming the content of the text message, the electric doorbell of my house started buzzing non-stop like a monsoon.

Simultaneously, another message came.

【**Date** 17:21

【**Subject** OPEN THE DOOR! [40]

【**Subject** open open open open open

door door door door door

open open open open open

door door door door door

"Okay I get it, I'm coming! I'm opening the door now!"

I stretched my lungs and shouted with a voice that could even be heard from outside. Then I ran down the stairs and rushed for the door.

When I opened the door—

"You're so mean, Eita."

Tears were emerging from Natsukawa Masuzu's pale blue pupils. Her silhouette masked the overpowering glare of the setting sun as she stood outside the door.

"Didn't you say 'arrivederci'?"

"You're so mean."

"Didn't you say we weren't going to meet until the new semester?"

"You're so mean, so mean, so mean…"

Masuzu barely forced those words out with great difficulty. Then, she jumped into my open arms.

"Eita, remember this. I'm your girlfriend."

"I know."

"I'm a girlfriend that gives you headaches."

"Why do you think that is!?"

If you were aware of it yourself, then do something about it!

"Yes, I'm the type of girl who can't do anything if I don't have you. That's why—please don't look away from me right now, please."

"...ahhh."

I comforted Masuzu's back to calm her down, and I distinctly felt the changes in my「girlfriend.

Right now, this Masuzu couldn't tell the difference between real or fake. Ever since that time I confessed to her on that stage, she's gone out of control. The fake acting and real actions were too much to handle, and she couldn't tell them apart anymore.

As for me… it was the same.

Like right now, as I hugged Masuzu's body, if I wasn't careful, I'd mistake her as a real girlfriend.

...but, we were still fake merchandise.

If we wanted to become real, we still needed to settle everything about the Chuuni notebook and「Jien-Otsu.

But that was already impossible.

Chiwa, Hime, and Fuuyumi, as well as Kaoru, Mana, Saeko-san, and even those others at school were involved with us. Our lie was no longer just our own private problem. Until the day we graduate and everything resets, we could only maintain this lie.

Just then, Masuzu suddenly raised her head.

Still hugging me, her eyes were fixated upwards towards the left.

Upwards to the left was the second floor of the Harusaki's house.

Chiwa's room was on the second floor.

And beside the window—there was the shadow of Chiwa with her hair down.

"..."

"..."

Masuzu maintained her position hugging me.

Chiwa maintained her posture at the window, slightly leaning forward.

They didn't say a word to each other or have any changes in expression. They only met with their eyes.

Like this, I was frozen in between these two girls.

I was helpless.

No matter what I said, I'd be stepping on a landmine.

"Hahahahaha…"

Even if I didn't say anything, I still gave a morbid laugh.

Cold sweat started dripping.

Even my tears… I think I'm going to cry.

There's too much mayhem between my girlfriend and childhood friend!

#5: When Eita isn't Here, The Love Battle

#5 鎖太がいない、恋は戦い

鋭太不在の部室で、
少女たちの本当の姿があらわれる――。

When Eita isn't at the club room, the girls reveal their true colors—

It was August 31st, in the afternoon.

The weather forecast finally predicted rain. For several consecutive days, the sky had been clear; but dark looming clouds finally approached from the horizon.

Today was also the last day of summer vacation, so the next school semester would go into session tomorrow. On this specific day, the「Society for Bringing Out Your Maiden Self had assembled.

Harusaki Chiwa.

Natsukawa Masuzu.

Akishino Himeka.

Fuyuumi Ai.

Four glasses of barley tea rested on the surface of the table.

There was no glass for Kidou Eita.

He hadn't been told about today.

He hadn't been told about this meeting being held.

"Now that I think of it, it's very rare for just us to gather together."

In this atmosphere that was certainly different than the usual, Chiwa's cheerful voice seemed out-of-place.

Himeka also nodded her head.

"I think this is what's called「girls-only, according to Pachi Lemon.[41]

"That's weird, since when has Himecchi started reading 『PachiLe?

ce

"I started this month to exercise my Maiden's Power. It has some very interesting content."

Like this, Himeka wasn't that much different than unusual—no, actually, she was happier than normal.

Her feelings about this meeting were in the tone of「it's been a while since everyone had the opportunity to talk.

In contrast to these two cheerful individuals, Masuzu's expression was in low spirits. Normally she would have taken the lead as president and started all sorts of things by herself, but today she kept her silence and quietly read a novel. It wasn't that she was in a bad mood. Rather, she looked like she didn't have her usual energy.

Ai, on the other hand, wasn't even sitting. She stood by the window and gazed out towards the overcast skies.

She seemed to be deep in thought as she let out a「Fiu from time to time, combing her long hair upwards.

"What are you doing, Ai? Why don't you sit?"

Ai smiled and responded to Chiwa with a「Eeh? as she nodded.

She suddenly mumbled,

"...How pitiable. These girls were all dumped by Ta-kun in the end."

"Eh? What did you say?"

"Nothing at all."

Ai sat down, and her graceful posture seemed steeped with the easygoing confidence of a winner.

"Anyway Chiwa, why did you call us all out here?"

"Well, before the next semester starts, there's something I have to tell everyone."

One by one, Chiwa looked at Ai, Himeka, and then even Masuzu who still had her eyes fixed on her novel. Then she spoke,

"To be honest, I… confessed to Ei-kun."

"Ehh!?"

The surprised exclamation belonged to Himeka and Ai.

"What's the meaning of this? Chihuahua also likes Eita ?"

"Hah, that was obvious from long ago! Is it really true that you confessed to him? No, instead tell us when you did it?"

"The last day of the club trip."

Slam.

That was the sound of the novel being snapped shut. Masuzu spoke soon afterwards.

"I, happened to be present at the time."

Masuzu's and Chiwa's gazes collided over the table.

Ai and Himeka unconsciously held their breath. Although they've seen these two fight many times, today the aura was clearly different from the usual — intimidating. It gave out a dreadful feeling.

————————*This is serious.*

Himeka fled the mat as if running away and she promptly hid herself behind the curtains.

Ai glanced back and forth between these two girls who were glaring at each other. She wondered if she should interfere as a disciplinary committee member.

However—

"But you can relax, you know?"

Chiwa spoke candidly, practically destroying the tension in the air.

"I was rejected."

"Eeh?"

"I was rejected by Ei-kun. He said he couldn't see me as anything beyond a childhood friend."

Only then did Masuzu's expression change significantly.

Her sour expression became cheerful in an instant, and she immediately pressed her now「out of strength cheek against the table.

"Uaaaaan, that's a relieeef~~~n!"

It was something completely unthinkable for the 'cool Masuzu', as she let out a rather lazy voice.

From the top of the table a「monyomonyo rubbing sound could be felt.

"B-But of course. Yes, that's natural. Because I'm already Eita-kun's girlfriend. Even if Harusaki-san confesses to him, of course he wouldn't be touched so simply. That's right, that's exactlytrulynaturally. Aa. Aaaaa… Of course I totally knew it. Aaa"[42]

"..."

Was President possessed by evil spirits? —Himeka was frightened.

Natsukawa-san is such a mysterious person —Ai was astonished.

But Chiwa was absolutely convinced—

If she was that relieved, then she must have taken a fairly big hit.

Although people frequently labeled Chiwa as「empty muscle brain, she wasn't a fool at all when it came to battling with others. Due to her kendo experience, she had developed an intuition that could to see through the subtle but true intentions of a dueling blade.

It might be love, but it was also no different from a battle.

Besides, it was a match she definitely could not lose.

Like this, Chiwa had long suspected that「Eita and Masuzu's relationship was not normal. Of course she didn't have any proof, and it was just wild intuition, but ever since the time Eita's aunt Saeko-san called them fake , she was certain that this was the case.

But because of the confession on top of that stage, she lost the strongest piece of evidence that she could investigate further into. However, Chiwa had not given up.

————Because those two are definitely hiding something from me!

Masuzu had no idea about what Chiwa was thinking, and she giddily continued,

"Ah, I feel like I'm so hungry now that I've relaxed! Let's take out the osenbe[43], let's take out the cookies, and let's take out the POCKY as well ♪ Since it's so hot, perhaps they're a little bit melted?. Akishino-san, can I trouble you to take them out?"

"A- Acknowledged."

Still quite afraid of the Masuzu who was practically about to jump up from the table, Hime took out their pre-purchased snacks from the pantry and spread them over the table. With so many refreshments, the club room felt a bit like a party. It really did have the atmosphere of a「Girls-only meeting.

But of course the current situation wasn't so cordial.

Chiwa revealed a chuckling smile.

"I've always wanted to ask, what does everyone like about Ei-kun?"

Masuzu, who had contentedly been drinking barley tea, suddenly became a bit more alert.

"Why are you asking that now?"

"Well, since I was rejected, it feels a little easier to ask now, right? Since I'm *just* Ei-kun's「childhood friend."

Chiwa had to subtly force herself when she said the words,「childhood friend.

She was emphasizing—even though she was rejected, that didn't mean her bond with him was completely cut off.

Furthermore, that line could be interpreted to imply,「as the childhood friend, I intend to continue intervening with you. Basically, they were words that established her own uncooperative stance.

"I like it when he is cool!"[44]

The person who energetically replied was Himeka.

"When Eita fought in front of the train station to save Chihuahua, it was seriously way too cool. It made me realize our destiny. Even now, when I remember his face from then, my heart starts to pound…"

Himeka's cheeks reddened to the color of apples, and she closed her eyes as if drunk.

She was so lovely, cute, and innocent—the remaining three of them were fascinated. Perhaps Himeka was actually the most「maiden-like of all the girls in the club.

"Then, Natsukawa?"

"I… well."

Masuzu's gaze was indecisive and couldn't stay fixated in one place.

"When he is gentle, can I say it like that?"[45]

"Hm? —What is that gentleness like?"

"I refuse to speak about it."

There was a reason Masuzu gave that type of answer.

After being treated so gently by Eita in so many ways, 「fear surged within herself when she thought about speaking about it. Because if she shared it with others, wouldn't those unknown but warm feelings that she kept hidden inside her heart evaporate like smoke? She was held back by this bizarre premonition.

But Chiwa didn't know about those reasons, and she only interpreted Masuzu's reaction as 「very suspicious.

"Why don't you want to say it?"

"Because there is no need to tell it to Ms. Childhood Friend."

"...Hm-ph…"

While the atmosphere feebly started to twist askew between these two girls that glared at each other—

Ai was completely oblivious to the situation as she giggled with a brilliant voice.

"Yeah yeah! As long as it's Ta-kun, Ai-chan loves ev~rrrything about him! There's nothing I hate ♪"[46]

The club room suddenly went silent.

Three of them were flabbergasted,

"What's with Fuuyumii?"

"Why is that, Fuyuumi-san?"

"Why Master?"

The three of them tilted their heads at practically the same angle.

"W-Why can't I? What's so wrong if I say it too?!"

"But Master already has Michel."

Himeka was referring to the name of the fake boyfriend that Ai had made up.

But she had already set up her engagement with Eita (or so she thought), so as matters stood, there was no reason to continue on with that awkward lie. But at this point it was rather difficult to come clean about it.

Ai's expression shifted swiftly as she spoke,

"U-Uhh—um, even so, I've felt rather distant from Michel lately. To be honest, I think our feelings have become dull? Or like that."

"Ara but what is that? If it's a long distance relationship, weren't you basking in so much mutual love earlier? Doesn't he send you a pile of emoticons through text messages every day, morning and night?"

"No, even if that's the case, I feel like our feelings have become more and more heavy… the city's definitely changed him! Or something."

Ai tried to defend herself incoherently, but Himeka tightly clasped Ai's hand.

"Don't worry about it. I believe in Master's Maiden's Power, and you'll definitely overcome this crisis."

"Exactly, I'm sure you two will make up. Why are you reworking the setting again? That type of hand won't work anymore."

"Truly—! Aaaaah— I still really envy you for being so lovey dovey with your boyfriend".

"G, Gughhh…"

After being retorted like that, Ai could only bite her lip silently.

"Well, next up is me."

Himeka's eyes started to shine.

"How much does everyone like Eita? I like him this much!"

Himeka stretched her arms as wide as she could to express how much her love was. Although she was making a ruckus like a child, she was unbelievably happy to talk about「Love Stories.

Everyone else slowly got caught up in the spirit.

"You're too naive, Himecchi! As for me, I love him from here to there!"

Chiwa ran from one end of the clubroom to the wall on the other end. Her smile seemed to say,「Take this!; she was similarly childish.

"That's too naive."

Masuzu pointed out the window,

"Mine is from that end of the athletics field to the opposite boundary—there's probably more than a hundred meters there. My feelings for Eita-kun are around that level."

She straightened her chest with a completely serious face.

Chiwa pursed her eyebrows.

"Wait a second, aren't you cheating?"

"Cheating?"

"Because I ran from one end of the wall to the other! Since that's the case, you should run from one end of the athletics field to the other, Natsukawa-san! You should move that tongue less and work on your body."

Masuzu pouted for a moment before the corners of her mouth curled up.

"Oh dear, but does strength really scale with love? If that were the case, a certain empty brained Chihuahua-san would be the number one, isn't that so?"

Chiwa was the one who frowned this time.

"Well, if you're going to play that way! My love for Eita goes from Hanenoyama Town all the way to New York!"

"Then, my love starts from the atmosphere and flies straight until the dark side of the moon."

"Huh, really, that's interesting. In that case, go, but don't come back to Earth after that!"

Chiwa and Masuzu glared at each other while only separated by the table. Meanwhile, Hime very happily chimed in,

"In that case, mine goes from the ground all the way to the last Hell, Judecca!" [47] However, she was beautifully ignored.

Ai used an excessive amount of force to bang on the table as she stood up.

"Fufufun! You guys are way too naive if you think you can with at that level! As for me, mine is...! The entire universe! Boundless ♪ My love to Ta-kun is INFUINITE![48] Meters and light years can't measure the dimensions of my love! If it were possible, I'd go outside and run to the boundaries of the universe—♪"

The club room fell to complete silence again.

The two girls who had been arguing earlier stared at Ai with stunned looks. Then, they changed their postures as if to say「Oh dear」nearly simultaneously.

Yare

"That's why, isn't Ai-chan in love with Michel?"

"E-"

"Why don't you text that ardent confession to Daigoro right now? No, you can call him this instant and tell him that. He'd definitely fly back to Tokyo right away."

"Ee-?"

Ai was at a complete loss for words, and Himeka gently put her hand against her forehead.

"Master, you've been exceedingly strange today. Could you be sick? Do you have a fever?"

Since even her pupil mentioned it, it really did look like she had lost her footing.

"Huuuuuuuuuun! Ai-chan messed up! Michel's an idiot! Idiot! Daigoro!"

Ai unsteadily walked to the window and wrapped herself in the curtains to hide. She looked like a teru teru bozu[49], except there were soft sobbing sounds that came from her like rain.

ıAra Masuzu stared at Ai with an expression that seemed to say,「Oh my」, but she was actually laughing deep down in her heart.

———There's nothing to fear from the devil disciplinary committee member!

All along, Masuzu had known that Ai had fabricated Murata • Michel • Daigoro's existence and that she actually liked Eita. But for now, Michel was an effective trump card for blocking Ai, so Masuzu had no intention of exposing her.

On the other hand, Chiwa felt「it was a bit strange, but she thought, oh well. She didn't think too much of Ai's dispute with Michel and ignored it. As for Himeka, she didn't have any doubts at all. Master's amazing! Master is so cute and popular!.

Because of the way these three thought, Ai's「imaginary boyfriend was not exposed… though it probably would have been better for her if it had been uncovered.

"In any event—"

Masuzu once again returned her gaze to everyone.

"In short, apart from Fuyuumi-san, this club is made of people who all love Eita-kun. It's very troublesome that this is the case."

"But, because of that I'm pretty happy!"

Himeka's voice was very energetic,

"Since the three of us like Eita, we're all comrades!"

"Comrades is it?"

"So, comrades…"

Masuzu and Chiwa had a subtle expression.

On this point, normally one would call it「rivalry in love, but Himeka apparently didn't see it that way. That was because although she loved Eita, she's never thought of monopolizing him.

At that point, Ai slightly poked her head out from the curtains.

"C-Can you let me join as a comrade with you guys?!"

"But Master already has Michel."

"Don't say such cold things! As an outstanding maiden , isn't it a great thing to have comrades who are working so hard towards a goal?! There's no reason to fight!"

Ai's sob-mingled words suddenly reminded Masuzu and Chiwa of something.

The words that Eita said on the last day of the club trip flashed through their heads.

『*At that time, they had made me suffer a lot. My parents had kept blaming each other for adultery and fought with each other, it had been carnage.*

『*Cursing, blaming, and criticizing each other— These kinds of people don't posses any appeal at all!*

Chiwa was very familiar with Eita's family situation. Masuzu also harbored complicated family problems, so she was very familiar with this sensation of anger that Eita expressed towards his parents.

If they continued fighting like this in front of Eita, maybe they might even become hated.

Maybe they might even bring suffering to Eita.

Neither Masuzu nor Chiwa wanted that kind of thing to happen. Absolutely not.

"...That's true."

Masuzu nodded, throwing away her hesitation.

"We are companions and comrades who've gathered together as the「Maiden's Club. *But only in front of Eita-kun*."

Chiwa also nodded.

"Since we're comrades, we have to be very friendly to each other. I don't want to let anyone see us fighting, *Ei-kun at least*."

"President and Chihuahua both understand?!"

Himeka blossomed with a smile as she clapped her hands together. Of course, she didn't notice the true things they meant to say.

After some hesitation, Ai also came out from the curtains.

"Mmmn, it's best when everyone's on good terms with each other. Long live the peace! *…if not, I won't be comfortable inviting you guys to the wedding*."

She added those last words while whispering, and no one else heard her.

And just like that, the「Society for Bringing Out Your Maiden Self returned to a truce.

Or at least, on the surface.

♦

As they changed their shoes to leave the building, little black dots started to speckle the asphalt.

Although it was just three o'clock, the sky was already dark. The odor damp air could be smelled in the air.

"It looks like it just started raining. The weather forecast really was accurate."

"My prophecy has also reached the same conclusion. These are the tears that the water goddess Aquarius is currently shedding."

Ai and Himeka opened their umbrellas and walked out into the rain.

Just when Masuzu was about to open her umbrella, Chiwa called out to her from behind.

"I want to fight Natsukawa fair and square, so will you answer me honestly?"

"What's this? That's sudden."

"Natsukawa, what are you hiding from me?"

By instinct, Masuzu's heart skipped a beat.

Naturally that wasn't due to affection.

She feigned her calm and produced an elegant smile.

"No? There isn't anything I'm hiding from you."

"Ah, really…"

Chiwa did not respond like she was convinced at all.

Masuzu then turned the tables and went for an attack,

"Even if there's something I'm hiding, there's no reason for me to tell you, is there? To someone who was already rejected."

Chiwa's fists clenched and stiffened.

She just barely restrained herself from showing her feelings.

"Although I said Ei-kun rejected me, I never said I was going to give up."

"Ee……?"

This time, Masuzu let one slip.

She couldn't keep her right temple from twitching.

"What's with you, childhood friend? Are you perhaps just bad at giving up?"

Chiwa's temples also started to tremble.

"What's with you, girlfriend? I wonder if there's a single thing that can be praised about you?"

Lightning flashed, and the deep rumble of thunder came from the dark skies.

A frightened cry could be heard near the school gates: 「I-I-I-I-I hate thunder! Damn it! My belly button's going to be taken away![50]. There was also a noisy shout that accompanied it: 「Gu! I'll quiet my right hand! You can stop this violent thunderbolt!.

Meanwhile, the flash of lightning illuminated these two as the downpour of rain drenched them. However, they only glared at each other silently.

Not long afterwards, the thunder clouds spent all their energy—

"Let's stop this, Harusaki-san."

Masuzu took out her cellphone and hung the 「strap in front of Chiwa's eyes.

"Aren't we comrades in the same club?"

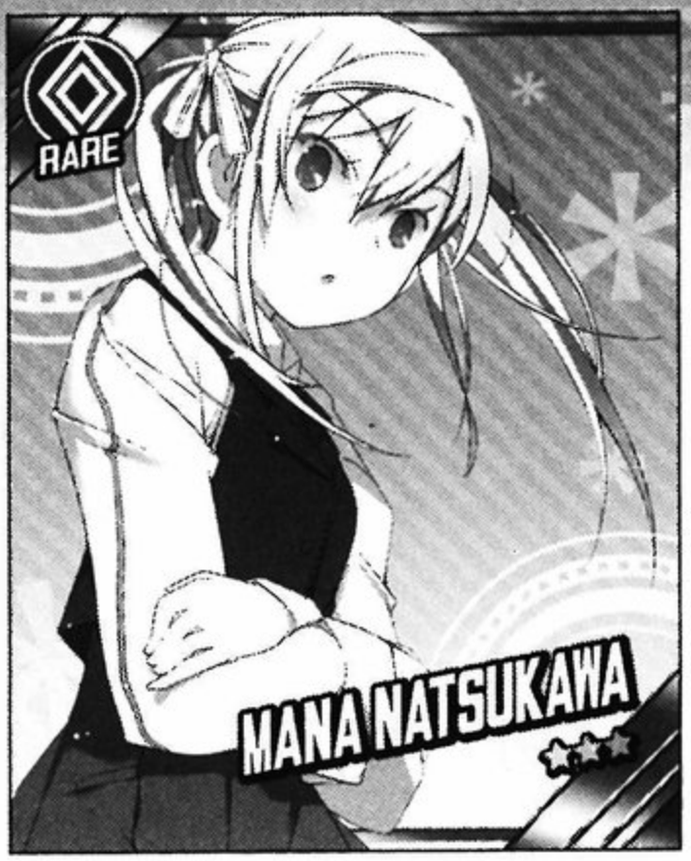
Chiwa also displayed the same cellphone strap in front of Masuzu.

"Yeah, we're good friends."

Then, the two of them smiled practically simultaneously.

They simply didn't notice Himeka's and Ai's shouts of 「What's going on—? from the school gates as they smiled .

"Ufufuf



【ナマイキJC】夏川真那

最大LV.60

攻 3000

守 2000

特技：金で解決

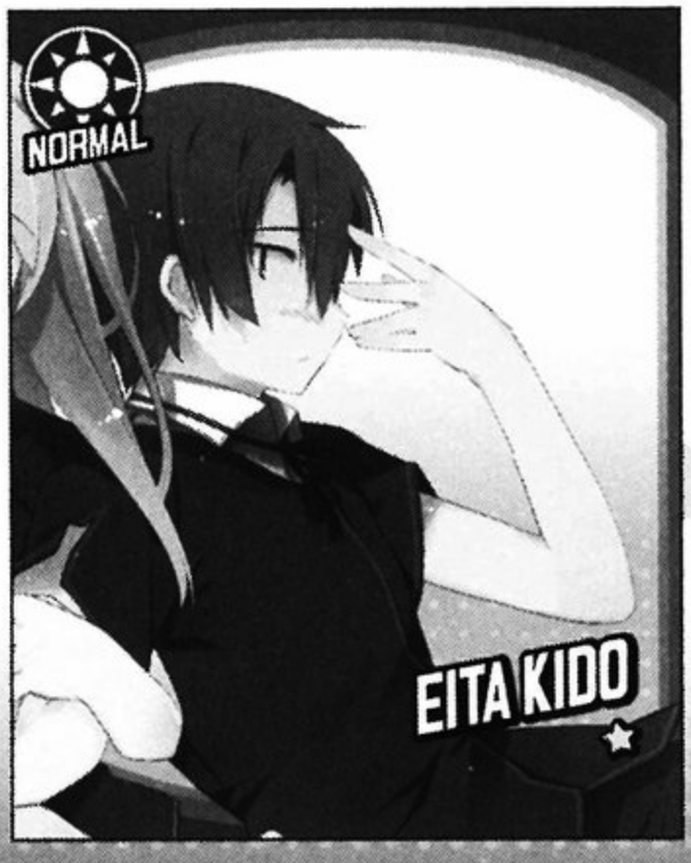
【頼れる親友】遊井カオル

最大LV.70

攻 1500

守 4000

特技：お悩み相談



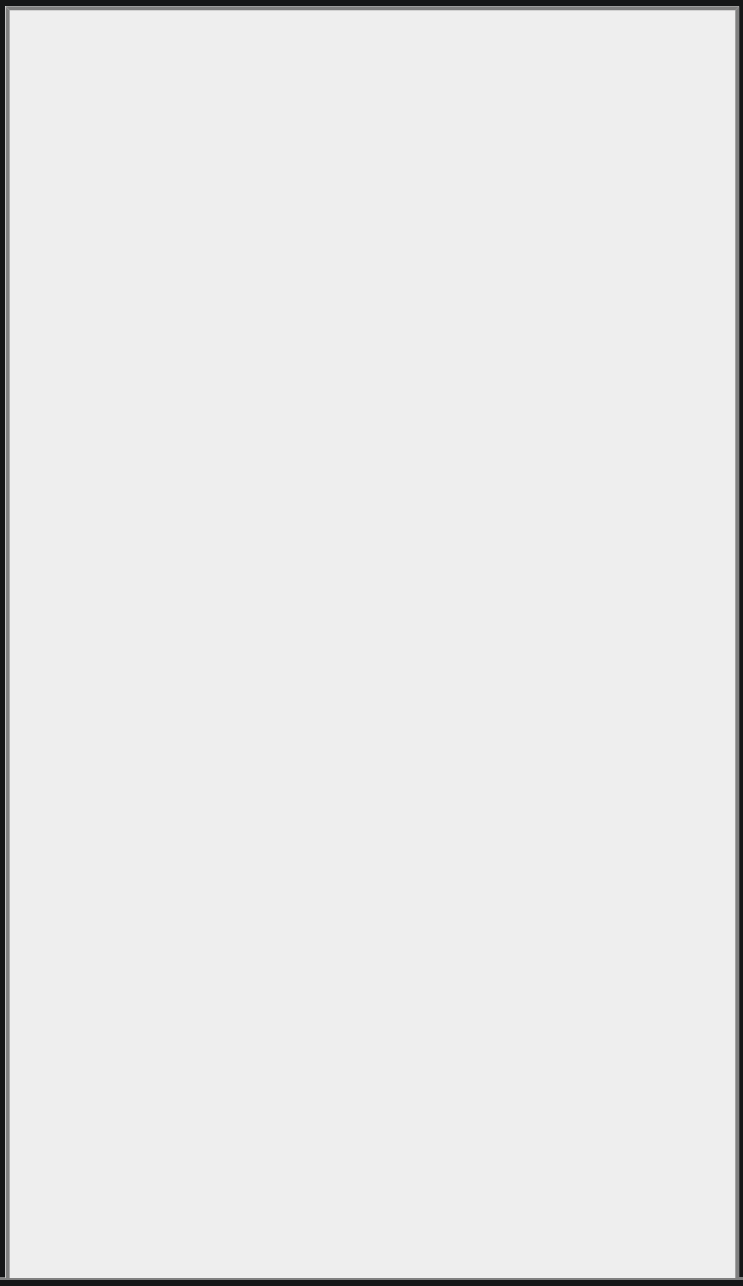
【恋愛アンチ】季堂鋭太

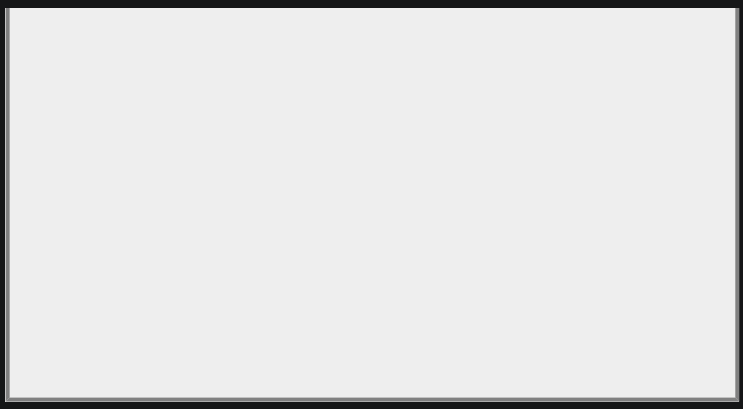
最大LV.50

攻 2000

守 1500

特技：ガリ勉





#6: The End

#6 エピローグ

It was September 1st.

'The end of summer vacation was the end of the world.' I used to think this way in middle school, but right now I was thinking like this for a different reason; of course, it was because club activities were starting again. As soon as I thought about how I might get caught up in a whirlpool of mayhem again, I wanted to curl up in bed with an out-of-season summer cold.

It was the school opening ceremony.

In order to listen to a pointless speech from our principle, we had been assembled in the gymnasium. Kaoru tapped on my shoulder from behind me,

"Eita, you look exhausted. What's up?"

My best friend had a bright smile today as well. His eyes were sparkling, his skin was glossy, and even his eyelashes were long like a girl's. What did he eat and what time did he go to bed to look like that? If I published it, I'd make a fortune.

"...vacation's over, so of course I'm melancholic."

"Really? At the contrary, I'm pretty happy because I'll see all of our classmates again, right?"

Kaoru was the secretary of the student council and had a wide circle of friends. Earlier, he had been surrounded by a lot of friends in the classroom.

"Hmph! Die you riajuu, you're my enemy!"

Kaoru patted me on the shoulder, and started to fidget as if trying to tease me.

"You're calling me a riajuu? How silly. Eita's more of one, right?"

"Huh? On what basis?"

"That's because, look—"

Kaoru aimed his eyes at a line of people to my right.

I followed his gaze and by chance, my eyes met with Hime's who was lined up amongst the girls from Class B.

Hime's mouth went wide with a soft exclamation of surprise, but she quickly lowered her head and hid her face. Even from a distance meters away, I could tell that even her ears and neck were completely red.

"Akishino-san's been looking at you this whole time. Did you not notice?"

"..."

I hadn't noticed.

But she wasn't actually staring at me, was she? —it was more like she was muttering some kind of curse?

"It's not just Akishino-san. Look over there."

I looked where Kaoru pointed and saw that Fuyuumi had pinned on her disciplinary committee member armband and was currently inspecting the lines. While she checked the uniforms and hairstyles of the students, she occasionally stole glances at me.

When our eyes met, she winked, and I somehow felt like I even heard a「pa~cha sound effect—

"Hahaha, that's definitely Ai-chan's style of flirting."

Even if Kaoru laughed, I couldn't get myself to laugh at all.

That was because the other disciplinary committee members were also staring at me.

—If you dump our companion, we won't forgive you!

I felt like the stabbing glares that pricked my back were filled with those kinds of threats. The people who had this one sentiment towards me were most powerful legion at Hane High, the disciplinary committee, which could potentially become my enemy...

"But, the first one was 『that person, though."

Even though he didn't specify the name, I could guess who it was based on how Kaoru said it.

I looked towards the line of girls from Class E, and sure enough Chiwa was watching me from the very front .

She smiled as she made a tiny wave. I couldn't help but wave back, but then she—

I.

Love.

You.

The.

Most.

—She mimed with her lips.

I hastily averted my eyes, but—

"You're blushing? Eita."

Kaoru pointed this out with a smile, but my cheeks continued to get hotter and hotter.

Damn! I'm supposed to be anti-love!

"W-What's with that girl?! She has no sense in this kind of place!"

"What's wrong with that? She's just expressing that she loves you in that way, Eita?"

"I have a girlfriend! What am I supposed to do!?"

I shot back, but I suddenly realized something very strange.

Initially, the reason why Masuzu and I made the「fake couple contract was to protect Masuzu from getting confessions from boys.

But now, wasn't I using the「I have a girlfriend excuse to hold back Chiwa, Hime, and Fuyuumi's crisscrossing attacks?

Ever since then, I've never seen anyone confess to Masuzu, so the「fake couple excuse was undoubtedly very effective. But what happened to me? Even though I had a girlfriend, there were these girls who didn't want to give up. How was I supposed to deal with them? Was becoming gay my only choice?

"E-Eita, over t-there."

Kaoru called out to me with a trembling voice, and I turned around to look. My line of sight merged with Masuzu's gaze, who was lined up diagonally behind me to the right.

Although she had a friendly smile… her clenched hands were trembling, unable to hide the throbbing that clearly rippled over her body.

Just like Chiwa from earlier, she moved her lips without making a sound,

Don't!

Look!

At!

Other!

Girls!

—She declared those precious words.

Since my girlfriend was less calm than either my childhood friend or ex-girlfriend, this was honestly pretty incredible. We won't consider the fiancée for now.

Kaoru spoke with fearful words.

"It seems like Natsukawa-san's power has increased since last semester.

"Yeah, but mostly her jealousy."

"Are there club activities after school today?"

"...Yes."

Last night, Masuzu sent a text message saying,「Tomorrow, you must come to discuss the plans for next semester!.

If everyone gathered under this kind of atmosphere, surely a huge clash would come out of it?

Perhaps someone would even pull out a kitchen knife? Perhaps even a Rambo Knife?[51]

If that happened, it'd be too late to save myself.

"Hey, Kaoru, do you have a copy of 『Jumpin the classroom?" [52]

"I forgot to take home the ones I left in my locker, so there should be two copies."

"Thanks so much! Can you lend those two to me later?"

The thicker it was, the better. It'd improve my survival rate.

Even if it turned into mayhem with knives and swords—I still had to be a man!

I was worried for nothing.

"The new semester has finally arrived—let the Society for Bringing Out Your Maiden Self recommence!"

Masuzu declared this in our club room after school. The other three responded with enthusiastic applause.

Chiwa looked at everyone's faces,

"It looks like all of our members are present! That's great!"

"I also feel happiest when we're all together. It's peaceful."

"Hehehe, I've slowly started to like this club too!"

Hime and Fuyuumi had wide smiles across their faces. Their mood was so good, it absolutely horrified me.

"What's with you guys? Is there some sort of occasion? "

"Oh dear, is Eita-kun not happy? We've all reunited."

"Well not exactly that."

I also vigorously welcomed such peaceful club activities, but I couldn't help but suspect something was going on.

"Oh yeah Ei-kun, why is your stomach so big?"

"Huh?! No it's not, this is…"

I had placed two copies of JUMP under my shirt, so I looked a bit like a pregnant woman.

"Eita, virgin pregnancy?"

"How shameless, how many months pregnant are you ? Who's the father?"

Hime and Fuyuumi made some irresponsible remarks. Of course I wasn't a virgin girl and I certainly wasn't about to give birth.

"Of course not—I put the books I borrowed from Kaoru here because it'd be too heavy to put it in my backpack, hahaha."

Under the unfathomable expressions of the four girls, I took the magazines from below my shirt and placed them on the table.

"Well, if Eita-kun likes it, there's nothing to say about it . Today we'll be starting club activities."

Masuzu wrote large letters on the whiteboard.

Take first place at Hane High's anniversary—!

"Take first place….?"

This wasn't an exam or a sports competition, so I didn't quite understand.

"Does Ei-kun not get it? At the anniversary of our school's founding, there'll be a ranking of the performances that each club puts on."

"Who judges it?"

"People from outside the school will vote. After all the acts finish, they'll count the ballots. They say everyone gets really excited during that time."

I see. It looked like our school really liked lively festivals like those.

"But, can we put on a show? There's only five of us."

"That's why we're starting to think now. Let's think together."

Masuzu looked at all the club members and smiled sweetly.

"Even if our club doesn't have many members, it won't be a problem. If we work together as a team, we won't lose to anyone. We'll join forces and become the winners."

"J-join forces and work together?"

I couldn't help but repeat those words as a question.

Where did this mayhem-filled club look to find vocabulary like teamwork and joining forces? Even jokes had limits.

"Yeah! For these kinds of activities, you got to have strong bonds to win!"

—Haa, that's weird?

"We're the bravest team that was chosen, and shining bonds are the key to victory!"

"As long as the five of us work together, we'll do really well, right?"

It wasn't just Chiwa. For some reason, even Hime and Fuyuumi seemed really excited.

"..."

What was going on with these girls?

Why were they saying stuff like teamwork and joining forces?

"You guys seem kind of different today."

Chiwa tilted her head,

"Different, how so?"

"Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I didn't think the relationship between you all was *that* good."

"That was something of the past."

As Masuzu said this, she took her 「strap that hung from her cellphone.

Almost like they were ganging up on me, Chiwa and the rest of them also took out their cellphone straps and displayed them.

"Did Ei-kun put his on?"

"Ah, yeah."

Since I was asked like that, I also took out the 「strap that hung off my cellphone.

"After the 『Society for Bringing Out Your Maiden Self had that club trip, we've forged some steady bonds."

"We're going to gather all of our strengths. The goal is to be cute and popular!"

"In order to become an outstanding maiden, we have to risk our lives in battle!"

"Hehe, if I become our coach, there won't be a problem at all!"

The four of them looked at each other with smiles on their faces, and then they turned their eyes on me.

"Eita-kun, please lead our team cheer."

"C-Cheer?"

"Something like「Fight! or Let's get started—."

Since Masuzu asked, I didn't have a choice.

"L-Let's fight, yeah—"

"Yeah——♪"

The four maidens raised their fists into the air.

I felt like the circumstances have kind of derailed, but if they were on friendly terms, at least it was a good thing.

...it's a good thing, right?

And just like that, we started discussions, and Masuzu chased after me when I went to the bathroom.

"Waaa! W-What are you doing?!"

Not caring for the consequences, Masuzu hugged me from behind and pushed me into an empty classroom.

"You were talking to others girls again, weren't you?"

"How would you know!?"

"You even said one thousand thirty-eight words."

"How terrifying!"

What was wrong with the girl? She was saying more and more extreme things.

"Are you saying I can't talk to Chiwa and the rest of them? That's too absurd. There's no way a 「girlfriend can have that kind of authority."

When I said that, Masuzu looked surprised and seemed to sober up.

"...I-I don't mean to force you to do things to that extreme. It's just that my chest hurts when you talk to other girls…"

I gave a big sigh.

"Why are you troubling yourself to that extent? You know that I'm a fake boyfriend."

"I don't understand myself anymore."

Masuzu looked away from me and her shoulders drooped very pitifully.

"Recently, I've been less and less able to understand myself. I know love is pointless, but whenever I'm around you I feel like I need to do lovestruck activities.

When I'm alone, my head clears and I hate myself… but as soon as I see your face, it just starts all over again.

Her illness really was rather grave.

Masuzu did sincerely like me—that was the simple explanation; but the terrifying thing was, that wasn't the case.

More accurately, as Masuzu said herself, it was more like「she had confused herself while trying to act like a lover.

"Don't over think it. If you take an act too seriously, you'll only get thrown into chaos, right? It's like getting tricked by the person you're trying to trick."

"Mm…"

I suddenly thought of something.

"Hey, why don't you say「Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend ten times?"

"…If I do that, can I hug you once?"

O-Okay.

"S-Sure! It's just a small thing."

Masuzu finally gave a small smile.

"Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend. Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend. Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend. Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend. Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend. Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend. Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend. Kidou Eita is my fake boyfriend. Kidou Eita is my—"

Just when she was about to finish saying it ten times, a noise came from the hallway outside.

That was the sound of something colliding with the wall, making the windows vibrate.

Someone was outside!

"Who's there!?"

I quickly opened the door and strode out into the hallway, but the person I found was—

"Fake boyfriend. What does that mean?"

Akishino Himeka.

Hime had covered her mouth with her hands, and her eyes were wide open with her body propped against the wall to support herself.

It seems like she hadn't realized she had already bumped into the wall, and she continued trying to back up despite making no progress. Every time she took a step, she slid further down the wall… until finally she was sitting with her butt on the floor.

"H-Hime! This, well—"

"Fake boyfriend. What does that mean?"

I had nothing to say, and I stood there blankly.

"What is it, Eita…!?"

Masuzu followed me out of the classroom, but she startled when she saw Hime and froze in her steps.

Normally, she'd burst out with all sorts of excuses, but today her lips were glued shut like a sealed letter, completely frozen.

I always knew this day would eventually come, but I never expected it would be today.

—The truth about our act (as fakes), had finally been revealed.

Afterword

He was probably thinking along the lines of this:

"Love, is it really such a beautiful thing?"

Despite how his parents talked non-stop about the beauty of love and romance, they vanished at the very end because of very ugly mayhem—this was the a very deep influence on how his 「anti-love principles took shape.

In order for him to fall into the river of love, he'll have to experience the 「beauty of love himself.

However, he's surrounded with the mayhem from the girls around him.

The more our female protagonists express their love to him, the more they'll tie him up in their rivalries and grow more distant from him. It's ironic and it 「doesn't make sense , but it's true to life.

—Even flowers can symbolize disorder.

—Goodbyes are a fact of life.

How will Eita and the girls overcome this 「Anti-Love? Or will they surrender to it in the very end? It will be my honor if you, the readers, read until the very end.

Well then, the story for this time will end here.

I would like to thank each one of my readers from accompanying me to this point.

Translator notes and references

1. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunraku
2. ↑ I'm guessing at this (correct me if I'm wrong), but Chiwa has been using a less serious way to say "love " in the past instead of the most serious way of saying it.
3. ↑ The reference is specifically to a delivery service company called Takkyūbin.
4. ↑ **Jien-Otsu**: Self-pretending or talking snark to yourself. Refer to the terminology document.
5. ↑ This refers to the feeling of being pressured as if you were going to drown or be trapped, as a moat is basically like a ditch(around an object) that protects it from water.
6. ↑ In asian cultures, people try to pick the luckiest days for the marriages via horoscope (or plain intrinsic lucky numbers).
7. ↑ The Chinese TL references note says that the last syllable of "President" (い) was left out so it reads (). I have no clue what this is supposed to allude to, though. xD
8. ↑ **Bishounen**: A male character that is both handsome and extremely popular
9. ↑ Combo is in English.

10. ↑ "Homo" shortened English for homosexual(adj.) or "gay"
11. ↑ Not sure what kind of idiom a soaked rabbit is, but that's what it says.
12. ↑ The reference is to the manga, Fist of the North Star.
13. ↑ Love punctuation marks? I guess that's the little < 3 and music punctuations marks you see in video games...
14. ↑ **French Window**: A floor-to-ceiling height window.
15. ↑ Another definition since I'm utterly clueless about fashion. A **Boston Bag** is a traveling bag or general-utility bag that is oblong at the bottom and is tapered or folded in at either end toward a top opening held together by two handles.
16. ↑ Is a reference to the manga: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drifters_(manga)
17. ↑ In Japanese, "Run Away" is "いい". The Romanji for this is are the sounds, "i - e - de".
18. ↑ This is spoken in formal language (Hime abbreviates it a lot, but it's still a vague formal expression). Eita starts to reciprocate in the next sentence but...
19. ↑ Reference to Super Robot Wars: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Robot_Wars

20. ↑ **Riajuu**: The opposite of an otaku.
21. ↑ **Tankōbon**: Manga collected in volumes. Hime means she doesn't follow the weekly releases, and she only reads the tankoubon.
22. ↑ **Konakijii**: A youkai that has the body of a weeping child but the face of an old man. If you pick it up, it'll strangle you to death.
23. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C5%8Djinshi
24. ↑ The printing format of light novels is bunkoban, which is smaller than your typical books.
25. ↑ In honor of m-chan (Baka-Tsuki Facebook)! You can correct the "shtick" whenever your feel like it. It's actually just "stabbing", but cloud is playing around. The sexual pun is definitely there XD * teeheeee~*
26. ↑ I think I'll need a lot of help working out this chuu2 section. It's difficult, and I think I'm missing things from the Chinese. I mean, the Chinese translators didn't even bother translating a part... Anyways, please refer to forums for this.
27. ↑ Masuzu's name (真): means "true", means " refreshing".
28. ↑ **Maguke (Punishment Extreme):** A fictional TV show mentioned in earlier volumes

29. ↑ Ripple is a JOJO reference, previously alluded to a lot in the series.
30. ↑ Zombies are a kind of subordinate of Dio, a major antagonist in JOJO
31. ↑ Don't know what this is a reference to.
32. ↑ 30'C = 86'F
33. ↑ They're homophones in Japanese. They both sound like "butoukai".
34. ↑ This proverb means that everything takes time before results can be had (presumably because those are the number of years before those trees bear fruit) . The front half the proverb sounds the same as " sharing love".
35. ↑ The song if you're interested: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrqVkdGHJZs
36. ↑ Dog sound effects in Japan
37. ↑ Stand: JoJo reference
38. ↑ In English
39. ↑ Italian for goodbye. It's also a reference to a catch phrase of a certain character in JOJO
40. ↑ In English
41. ↑ The kanji is 女 , meaning "girls only gathering"
42. ↑ yes, she fumbles her sentences
43. ↑ a type of rice crackers

44. ↑ the answer is literally more in the "where he is cool", as a directed answer to "what you like". For translation purposes, it was phrased differently
45. ↑ In lieu to the previous note, this is also "where he is gentle", following her nature Masuzu didn't used words related to love
46. ↑ naturally, she used her trademark child tone here
47. ↑ This could be a reference to Super Robot Wars Original Generations (wouldn't be the first ref from the volume), which in turned pulled the reference from Dante's Inferno. The attack itself has a robot, Judecca; "pulling down" the enemy through several layers of different hells, stopping in the last hell, also named Judecca.
48. ↑ Typo intentional
49. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teru_teru_bozu
50. ↑ The Chinese TL explained that this is a popular folk tradition in Japan… You frighten little kids by telling them that...
51. ↑ A type of survival knife popularized in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rambo_(film_series)
52. ↑ He's referring the Shounen jump… and advice that he received earlier in the series.